

On Spec

more than just science fiction

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FEATURING NEW WORK BY:

Edo van BELKOM • Gerald L. TRUSCOTT

Kate RIEDEL • Richard STEVENSON

ON SPEC
more than just science fiction

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On·Spec

Spring 1998

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Dueling Editorials: Part 1

On music

Barry Hammond

What the hell is music?

If you're trying to learn it, it seems like a pretty complex language. Since I'd both enjoyed and had thought much on the theories of origins and definitions of language put forth by science writer Steven Pinker in his book *The Language Instinct*, I decided to look up what he had to say about it. His latest book, *How The Mind Works*, has a whole section devoted to this question and the first sentence of that section is: "Music is an enigma."

Oddly, and perhaps revealingly, I found that very pleasing. It's still a mystery. I like mysteries as much as I like speculative fiction. Like the *why* of when the force we call "life" is absent, we're no longer rational, variously talented, infinitely interesting, unique individuals—just rotting pieces of meat—Meat Puppets, as the pop band of the same name put it.

Pinker gives it a good try, analyzing music's aspects under six headings. The first five are:

1. *Language* - Here, he talks metrical structure—strong and weak beats being somewhat akin to the structures of poetry and the hierarchical groupings of phrases within phrases giving us a gut feeling that music conveys a complex message. Also, the idea that it varies from culture to culture and that it has to be learned.
2. *Auditory Scene Analysis* - His theory is that we analyze pitches and sound frequencies so we can determine their sources and separate wind from rushing water and from other animals, etc.
3. *Emotional Calls* - The possibility that certain melodies evoke strong emotions because their skeletons resemble speech's emotional calls—whining, moaning, weeping, growling, etc.
4. *Habitat Selection* - That certain sounds correspond to safe and unsafe habitats—thunder, twigs snapping, water, birdsong, etc. It may explain why soundtracks in films seem to reflect place so well.
5. *Motor Control* - These are the rhythms reflected in running, walking, certain repeated work gestures, all the variations of muscle control and release.

He weaves together the various cases, histories and implications of all the theories but it's his sixth heading which I found the most interesting. That's the one called "Something Else."

Under that heading, he says such poetic things as: "perhaps a resonance in the brain between neurons firing in synchrony with a sound wave and a natural oscillation in the emotion circuits."

Perfect. In my own particular favorite scientific words, "We don't fucking know."

He also says, "As far as biological cause and effect are concerned, music is useless." It "appears to be pure pleasure technology, a cocktail of recreational drugs that we ingest through the ear to stimulate a mass of pleasure circuits at once."

Good enough for me.

It does have a few more serious aspects, however. It can both embody history and create history. Again, film soundtracks use the type of music played to set a scene very specifically in a certain time period. As far as making history goes, it has been convincingly argued that the release of Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* on Folkways Records in 1952 was single-handedly responsible for the folk boom of the late 50's and early sixties and with it the rise of blues and rock and roll. Blues and jazz music not only reflected but seemed to propel the civil rights movement in the same period. It can also separate one generation from another the way rock separated my generation from our parents, or the way today's hip-hop, rap, metal, industrial and acid-jazz separates many people of my age from their

children. In some religions, music has been viewed as possessing such power that it has been banned, along with dancing. Yet, in traditional music, it can build a continuity between players over hundreds of years.

These are just examples from the 20th century. I suspect it's different for every time and everyone. To quote from Francis Bacon's *Essays*, a quote which is also used in *Last Night's Fun*, another book on music—this time Irish traditional music, by Ciaran Carson, which I also recently read: "Generally music feedeth the disposition of spirit it findeth."

It certainly has reflected its different aspects in the work of the authors in this special theme issue:

In "In the Court of the Crimson King," Gerry Truscott uses the lyrics of a 1969 art rock song to inspire the characters, a narrative, and mood for his story of magic, intrigue and evil.

Kate Reidel's "Whyte Laydie" spins a tale around a banjo which is at the center of a suppressed memory.

"The Vivaldi Connection" by Susan MacGregor, ponders the question, "Do plants sing?" If so, why and of what do they sing?

David Chato's "Music Monkey" reflects on the idea of computers putting the muses of Greek mythology out of their jobs.

"Instrument of Death" by Edo van Belkom is the tale of a thing of beauty whose voice causes death.

Michael Vance's "Patience" takes place in a world where even an unfeeling, miserable fake can pass for a musician because of the amount of time which has passed since people last heard a real one.

Bonnie Blake's "Bouquet" is a story of first contact, communication and spirituality.

In "Raven Song," Marcie Lynn Tentchoff writes a story in which a mysteriously knowing bard follows certain travelers to get material for his songs.

In "Duende," Apollonia Leaf depicts

a character whose heart is moved by a different sort of music.

Last but not least, Richard Stevenson's "Cattle Rustlers From the Skies" is a song, complete with music.

Whatever type of music you listen to, or whatever your opinions on music in general are, we hope you enjoy these stories and this theme issue. ♣

BARRY HAMMOND was born in Edmonton, Alberta, and attended the University of Alberta majoring in theatrical design. His first novel, *Cold Front*, was published by New American Library in 1982, short fiction in *Horizon SF*, and his first collection of poetry, *Moral Kiosk*, by Underpass Press in 86. Other recent poetry has appeared in *Zygote*, *Ink*, *Undertow*, *Printed Matter* (Japan), and *Madame Bull's Tavern*. He has been an editor with *On Spec* since 1991. A man of catholic music tastes, Barry listens to blues, jazz, folk, classical, rock, popular, modern avant garde, bluegrass, and pretty much everything else in between. He especially likes singer-songwriters and composers whose work doesn't fall under any discernible genre. For the past four months, he has been scarring his fingers attempting to learn acoustic guitar.

Dueling Editorials: Part 2

Yakety yak

Jena Snyder

*I don't care what music is, or why it works on the listener the way it does. I don't want to analyze it, discuss it, dissect it, or decipher it. I just want to **feel** it.*

That's the biggest difference between Barry and me, despite our many similarities—both coming out of the drama program at the University of Alberta, both reading and writing and editing SF, both growing up in Alberta in the 60s and 70s, both unable to live without music—it's the *when* and *why* we listen to music that puts us at opposite ends of the scale.

Barry immerses himself in music, studying CD liner notes, poring through interviews with musicians, seeking out long-forgotten artists and tracks and albums. He loves the history of music, the theory, the insider information. Most of all, he likes to try to figure out why he likes what he does.

To me, Steven Pinker's "emotional calls" and "motor control" described in Barry's editorial far outweigh any other aspect of music. Just as I want a story or book to move me, to grab my heart and either make it beat faster in anticipation in terror or slow down in restful meditation, I want music to move me as well. Music for me is a second

heartbeat: always there, sometimes fast and full of passion, sometimes slow and soothing, lending me blood and life and strength. In the same way that I don't think about why my own heart beats, I don't spend a lot of time thinking about why or how music affects me the way it does.

Is there any driver alive who hasn't found himself rocketing down the highway late at night, pedal to the metal, with something like "Twilight Zone" or "The Ride of the Valkyries" or "And the Thunder Rolls" pouring too loud out of the speakers? That's me: I like my driving music fast and hard and pounding with a ... well, *driving* beat. The bassline hooks me, that same bassline reverberating through the speakers to the dance floor, up through my feet and legs and straight into my heart, speeding its rhythm to match its own.

Affecting the listener in the same—but very different—way is the album *Wingless Angels*, Jamaican drum music by a group of Rastafarian musicians

that Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards has known and played with over the past twenty-five years. Quoted in *Rolling Stone* magazine, Richards says, "These people understand the necessity for trance in one's life. The beat they play is designed to be just under the heart rate." So the album works on the listener in exactly the same way—but in the opposite direction—that hard rock does: by artificially controlling the body's own rhythm.

When Barry listens to music, he does nothing but listen, devoting his entire attention to the music. When I asked him what kind of music he played while writing, his answer was no surprise: "... something like Brian Eno, abstract music, fluxing from one kind of thing to another."

The only time I do nothing else but listen to music is when I'm at a concert. For me, listening takes most of my concentration, and listening to lyrics takes the rest. Don't get me wrong: when I'm writing, I have to have music playing—no music feels like something crucial is missing, as if I've forgotten to breathe—but I can't play music that's going to play tug-of-war with my attention.

But I do make conscious choices about what kind of music is on while I'm writing.

When I was working on a vampire novel, my more than a century-old protagonist loved opera: "Opera never changes. Different singers come and go, Lanza and Carreras and Pavarotti, but a hundred years from now, I could go to *Bohème* and Rudolfo would still exclaim over Mimi's 'frozen little hand,' Musetta would still flirt with all

the men and Mimi would still die."

Opera was wonderful writing music: passionate, changing, exciting, with the bonus that the lyrics are never distracting. But when I finished *Cold Hands*, I stopped playing opera, moving on to nothing but the Doors, using song titles to open each chapter of the novella. When it was finished, I put my Doors tapes away. Now that I'm working on a novel entitled *Sister Morphine*, I'm driving my family crazy listening to the Stones.

So: if I don't want to analyze the music I listen to, why do I seek out and consistently play a certain kind of music while I'm writing? How much influence, for example, did listening to the Doors songs have on my plotline? Was I looking for chapter titles, or ideas? Was I trying to put my body and brain in some kind of syncopation with the music?

Maybe it wasn't that at all. Maybe all I really wanted was to give my readers something extra by adding music to the mix, even if they couldn't actually hear that music. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was adding an imaginary hyperlink for readers to follow if they knew the songs. If my readers weren't familiar with the Doors' "People Are Strange" or "Love Me Two Times," they weren't missing anything. But if the mention of the title tweaked the memory of ol' Jimbo singing, they might start thinking about what the lyrics said and what they meant ... and they had a hint of what was coming in the chapter.

When I thought about it, I realized where I got the idea: from something I read in one of Stephen King's novels (*Tommyknockers*, I think):

A man driving through a small town in Maine is struck by how sleepy it is. There isn't a single soul on the streets, he realizes, starting to feel uncomfortable. He speeds up, anxious to leave the ghost town behind. As he reaches the outskirts, he passes sign that reads: "Thanks for visiting Jerusalem's Lot. Come back soon!"

Doesn't mean anything to you? No matter. It's not in the least bit important to the plot. If anything, it makes you and the character both uneasy, nothing more. But if you, like me, have read King's earlier book set in this small town, you know why Salem's Lot is deserted: it's populated by vampires who are, of course, asleep during the day. For the reader in the know, the scene sends a delicious little shiver of recognition and delight and pure creepiness down the spine.

With this kind of hyperlink or harmony (if we're going to stick with the music metaphor) in mind, we decided to ask all the authors and artists in our music theme issue to include some

"suggested listening" notes: Were they inspired by a particular piece of music or artist to write this particular story or to illustrate in this particular style? If not, what were their preferred artists or albums while creating? After you've finished reading, make sure you check out the bios at the end of the stories as well.

If we'd had a budget of millions, we would have included a CD with this magazine, or published the entire issue online with hyperlinks leading to audio files of all the authors' and artists' listening suggestions. Since that was impossible, we settled for the next best thing, giving the reader as many imaginary hyperlinks as possible in hopes of enriching your experience. If you don't know the music or musicians our authors suggest, maybe some of you will even be moved to seek that music out, to listen to it and enjoy it as a harmony to the stories.

But now, would everyone please take their seats—the performance is about to begin... 🌸

JENA SNYDER is *On Spec's* Production Editor in charge of typesetting, layout, and prepress. She is currently working on *Sister Morphine*, a crime/SF novel set in Edmonton. Recent publications include "Prescribed Burn" in *Tesseract's*⁶ and "Blue Elephants" in *Amantes de la Noche 2* (Anime Press 1997). While her taste in music ranges from opera (ask her to sing "*Vesti la giubba*") to "teenage death songs" from the 50s and 60s to Ashley MacIsaac and Great Big Sea, she is currently listening to everything from new and old Stones to Gillian Welch to the Philosopher Kings. She and husband Colin are partners in a forestry consulting and publishing business, Clear Lake Ltd., in Edmonton.



Suggested Listening:

Inspiration for this story came directly from the song by the same name, "In the Court of the Crimson King" by King Crimson, from their first album (1969).

Recommended listening before, during, or after the story:

Gentle Giant, *The Power and the Glory*; the soundtrack for *The Last Emperor*; Davey Spillane, *Out of the Air*; the Scottish folk-rock compilation called *Folk 'n' Hell* to The Chieftains or early Clannad (Irish) to Shooglenifty (Scottish).

In the Court of the Crimson King

Gerald L. Truscott

illustration by Tim Hammell

Seven lords of Banisvahd stood in a line from north to south upon a terrazzo map of their country. They all faced a red and gold high-backed throne that sat empty upon a marble dais. They exchanged puzzled glances and muttered uncomfortably. Lord Morec Si Dyim entered and sat on his throne. The lords fell silent, realizing that a great change had occurred. Morec the Red wore the jewelled crown of a king and the countenance of one who had achieved power long desired. His speaker followed and stood on his left. Then came a tall, yellow-clad jester with a seven-horned cap; he sat on a cushion at the right side of the dais. The king nodded and a red guard stepped from behind a curtain and emptied a sack in front of the lords. Fragments of burned rock, brick and bone, and a man's skull crashed to the marble floor in a cloud of ashes; a green standard, torn and blackened at the edges, fluttered down after them.

"Castle Maribahn," said the speaker. "King Holard the Green is dead. Behold your new king, Morec the Crimson!"

One or two of the lords gasped. Lord Dricarh the Brown was first to step forward and bow to the new king, then Larshec the Turquoise and Wedrad the Orange. The rest followed slowly, except for Anetuc the Black, who shouted a word of defiance and stomped from the room.

The king smiled. So did the jester on his cushion as he gently stroked the strings of his instrument. It made no sound, but in its hollow body the image of a soldier walked along a road. The jester watched, and whistled softly the beginnings of a strange song.

Verse One: The Purple Piper

He had walked or run for days, across the badlands and through the dark forest, but no weariness showed in his posture or expression. He wore the travelling armor of a warrior: light chain-mail hanging from leather shoulder and arm covers. His sword was sheathed on his back and he carried his helmet and gloves in his pack. Blue clothing under the mail identified his allegiance to Lord Trurah of Lecren. He was Callento, the Best Siar of Castle Lecren, come to compete in the tournament at Si Dyim.

"But the tournament's begun, siar," said the old man from atop a wagon. He led a train of perhaps twenty wagons and a throng of people on foot. "Started this morn in the castle."

Callento stopped stroking the neck

of the restless wagon-horse. "In the castle?"

"Yup. We come all this way to see the tournament, but there's no point. The new king—"

"Inside the castle walls," Callento repeated, incredulous. Tournaments were always held in open fields, for all to see, so the people could cheer on their champions.

The man pointed back towards the castle's towers, their tops visible over a small hill. "See where all the lords' colors fly." Then he added, "All except green."

But Callento was already running up the hill—the people moved aside to let him pass—and at the top he saw Castle Si Dyim on its hill in the center of the city, with the colored flags snapping sharply westward: from the highest towers flew the host red, and below, blue, turquoise, orange, purple, black, brown, and white. Callento thought it strange that he could not see green, for the king's color should have been prominent. But flags flying from the castle did not mean that the tournament was inside its walls. The old man must have been mistaken. A tournament could not be held in a castle: where would they hold the horse bouts? How could the people witness the power of their lords? No, the tournament must be on the grounds on the west side of the castle.

Most of the people leaving the city wore green, which was strange, but stranger still was that no one sang or played their instruments. Banis people never travelled without music—even a defeated army sang retreat songs as it hobbled back to its

castle. But here, these sad-faced peasants trudged silently by on either side of Callento. The only sounds to emerge from this sorry caravan were the scuffing of feet on the gravel road, the creaking of wheels and the banging of pots against the wagons. Callento could take no more of this, and began a marching song: "Lecren Blue great sky and sea, / River waters call to me..."

People stared blankly at him. They would not ask him why he arrived late for a tournament or what had happened to his horse. But later, some might make up a story about him to tell their children. Callento did not care what these people thought of him, only that his lord would forgive him for arriving late. Lord Trurah and the rest of his siars were already at the tournament. He had sent Callento to the Uplands north of Lecren to settle a landholder's dispute. Callento had tried to catch up to them, but in his hurry through the badlands, his horse fell and broke a leg. Callento slit the poor beast's throat and drank some of its blood for the strength to run the rest of the way. He hoped his lord would understand why he was late.

Still singing, he descended into the city. For every person leaving, a hundred stayed, bustling joyfully in the streets, playing music, singing, dancing. The air was heavy with the scents of food from all regions of Banisvahd, and the colors of all the lords danced around him. Callento stopped singing and enjoyed the music that came to him as he passed through the crowds. People moved cheerfully out of his path, and those

dressed in blue greeted him with a smile and a bow. Everyone he asked about the tournament said that it was being held in the castle. They all seemed content with the celebration, though they could not watch the contest.

In a square near the city's center, he came upon a concert. A piper played and singers sang from a stage by the central fountain. The audience was packed tight in the square, so engrossed in the performance that none danced, not even the children. No one moved aside for Callento, so he worked his way around the perimeter of the crowd.

He thought he heard a familiar melody in the piper's music, something like Lord Trurah's banquet overture ... but no. He stopped and listened more intently. Nearby, a merchant stood in the doorway to his shop.

"Shopkeeper," said Callento, "who is this piper?"

"He started two days ago, siar. Bigger crowds every day. Can you see him? Just a moment." He slipped into his shop and returned with a stool, placing it by Callento's feet.

From the stool Callento could see over the crowd, which must have numbered near a thousand. On the stage the piper danced and played. He was uncommonly tall and thin, and dressed in tight-fitting pants, a jacket and cowl, all purple. The nine singers, almost as tall, wore similar costumes in every other royal color—one even wore yellow, which no lord would dare to claim, for it was the color of Saulax, the sun, the giver of life.

Callento listened for a while. How beautifully the piper blended the songs of the lords into his music. He wove them daringly through the soft, haunting melodies of the choir, which sang in a strange language. The audaciousness of the music and the costumes shocked Callento at first, but then he found himself becoming absorbed, like everyone else, in the performance.

"Is he from Molt?" Callento asked the merchant, guessing that the piper wore the color of his home.

"Claims he's from nowhere. He wore black yesterday and green the first day. Says his music is about the end of music, whatever that means."

Callento tore his thoughts away from the music and stepped off the stool. "Which way to the castle?"

"Take that road." The shopkeeper pointed. "And turn up the hill at the second street."

The piper's music faded as Callento turned up the hill. The end of music, he thought, chuckling to himself.



In the court of the Crimson King, Lady Corivati the Black stood before the dais, facing a pair of thrones, eyes glistening with tears restrained. She stood on the terrazzo map, one foot grinding the tiles that marked Castle Si Dyim. Around her, lords and courtiers talked among themselves. The door to the king's chamber opened and the audience hushed. The king walked into the light, his speaker a step behind to his left. At the edge of the dais, he reached out to the Lady Corivati. She hesitated, then took his hand and stepped up

beside him.

The speaker announced: "King Morec Si Dyim the Crimson hereby declares his marriage to Lady Corivati the Black." The king and queen raised their arms together and the court applauded. The speaker added: "The holdings of Si Dyim and Dil Carva are united." More applause. The queen smiled too broadly as she and her new husband backed into their thrones.

The jester floated out from behind a curtain in a bright yellow cone with only his capped head showing at its apex. He hovered to the center of the court. His face dropped out of sight, leaving only the horns of his cap protruding from the top of the cone. The horns elongated, moved, danced as the cone skimmed over the floor; they pointed at courtiers, king and queen, to the delight of all. Inside the cone the jester sat cross-legged on a cushion of air, watching in his quiet instrument the image of the blue soldier approaching the castle gate, and softly whistled his song.

Verse Two: The Black Queen

The castle gate was shut tight. Groups of people milled about, as if waiting for it to open. Callento went to a smaller side door and pounded on it. "No entry till tomorrow," said a voice behind him. Callento turned angrily to face a small group of men dressed in brown robes and head wraps. Their color and crests identified them as the official chorus of Lord

Dricarh the Brown of Sarode. Behind them, a horse fidgeted in front of their wagon.

"We arrived shortly after the gate closed for the day," a chorister explained, "according to one of those over there." He pointed to the roadside where a band of troubadours sat by their wagon eating lunch and strumming their instruments.

Callento said nothing. Strange that they would shut the gates and not post guards to let latecomers in. He turned and pounded on the door again. Then he backed down the road a little and looked up at the ramparts, but saw no one. The chorus watched him hopefully, as if a siar might achieve what they could not. But Callento walked away, along the narrow path at the base of the castle wall. The other doors around the castle were locked up as tight as the main gate.

On the west side of the castle, the hill dropped steeply to the river. Callento looked over the western portion of the city to the traditional tournament grounds, still and silent. He pulled the last of his travel food from his bag and chewed on it, thinking of the tournament: the standards of the Nine Lords of Banisvahd, their brilliant colors slapping the air above the field; combatants and horses dressed in ceremonial regalia; the smell of the grass and upturned sod; the clash of metal and the droning of the horses; and above all, the voices of opposing siars singing proudly as they met head-on in competition. He remembered competing on the Si Dyim tournament grounds a few years ago: he'd fought two opponents until they

could sing no longer, but then a Green with a better horse rode the song out of his. *I've had bad luck with horses*, he mused.

His reflection was interrupted by the clanging of bells from inside the castle. The royal callers were about to make an announcement, but Callento was too close to the castle wall to hear it. He jogged along the path, while the callers shouted indistinguishable words above him and the cheers rose from the people below. Finally back at the main gate, he ran down the road as far as the troubadours' camp.

But he arrived just as the callers' funnels were being withdrawn between the parapets. Everyone around him was cheering, and the cheering radiated throughout the city as the relay callers repeated the message. Callento interrupted the celebrations of the brown chorus: "What did he say?"

"King Morec has wed the Lady Corivati of Dil Carva," said one.

Another added, "Banisvahd is united, north to south!"

And another: "He executed Lord Anetuc for treason and married his widow the same morning."

Callento grabbed the arm of the nearest chorister. "King Morec? What of King Holard?"

Too frightened to reply, the chorister tried to pull free of Callento's grip. One of his fellows said, "Don't you know? King Morec destroyed Mari-bahn and Holard with it."

"What?" Callento released the chorister's arm and stepped towards the other. "What about the tournament?" None of this made sense. A

lord hosted a tournament as a show of strength, and if a lord's siars defeated the king's in ritual combat, that lord could challenge the throne. But the challenge would come later. How could Morec have taken the throne? Yet he remembered someone, earlier this morning, speaking of the new king.

"The siars still compete," said the chorister. "Listen." The funnels were out again and the callers announced today's winners of the horse bouts: mostly reds, and a few others, but no greens. Maribahn always had the best horses.

"No greens competed?"

A small voice in the rear of the choristers said, "There are no more greens."

"No more greens?" This was too much for Callento. How could there be no more greens? Is this why the green peasants had left Si Dyim in such gloom? "Did you say Morec *destroyed* Maribahn?"

They all nodded at once.

"You must be mistaken. How—?" But the choristers were stepping backward, staring past him. Callento turned, ready.

A tall, muscular woman strode up the road towards him. She was dressed in the leather and mail of a siar, but wore no colors. She stopped a few paces away, bowed with arms spread apart and sang the greeting of peace: "May Sidel light your path, siar, / and Ardel ease your journey."

Callento returned the bow and sang the reply, "Peace and honor, fellow siar, peace and honor to your lord."

They relaxed and studied each

other. The woman was younger than Callento—recently out of training, he suspected. She wore travelling armor over grey clothing of the style worn in the south, but no colors or crests.

The woman siar said, "It seems we're late for the new king's special tournament."

"They say the gate will open in the morning," said Callento. "For whom do you compete?" It was a fair question. Only the southern castles—Maribahn, Dil Carva, Molt and Aron Ar—had women siars. Callento had fought them many times and was impressed by their ability to make up for their smaller stature with their quickness and agility, and also by their singing.

"For peace and honor," she said. "And the free lands of Ilnem. My name is Wanagi, and I have come to deliver a message to the new king."

"I just heard that the Red Lord has taken the throne," said Callento, glancing angrily at the brown chorus, "and that he destroyed Maribahn."

One of the choristers appealed to Wanagi. "You must have heard, siar. Please tell him."

Wanagi said to Callento. "Come Blue Siar—what is your name? Let's sit over there, and I will explain."

They sat by the castle wall. Wanagi said: "It's true. Maribahn is destroyed."

"What do you mean? You saw it?" After all, Ilnem bordered the lands of Maribahn.

She nodded, and Callento could see that she was restraining her emotions. "I was on the River Road," she said, "at the northern reach of King Holard's lands. And there by the road

was Morec the Red himself with his royal entourage, all gazing at fair Maribahn from the top of a hill. Admiring the emerald capitol, perhaps? No. They fussed about for a long time. The Red Lord kept climbing in and out of his royal carriage. Finally he emerged with a tall man dressed in yellow, and they went to the top of the hill. The yellow man opened a box and Morec took out a bright object—a polished metal ball, I thought, for it caught the sun's rays and flashed them in my eyes. Morec threw the ball into the air with both hands. Like a fiery bird it flew towards Maribahn, faster than the wind, and descended upon the city as if it were the sun itself. Maribahn burst into flames and was consumed by this hellish fire."

"Ha!" Callento burst out. "This is a wild story. A dream."

"By the fair moons, Callento, Maribahn is gone!" Wanagi reached into her bag and pulled out a piece of black glass about the size and shape of a pear, broken off at the small end. She tossed it to him. "The fire made shadows in the daylight. The sound was like a great roar, greater than storm waves or heaven's thunder." She paused, stared at the glass in Callento's hand. "It melted Castle Maribahn like a candle. It burned the city—our center of commerce and culture, our seat of kings who ruled for generations—burned it to the ground and crushed the cinders into dust."

Callento saw his own stunned expression exaggerated in the smooth convexity of the glass bobble. He gave it back to Wanagi. After a long

silence, he asked, "What message do you bring the new king?"

She smiled sardonically, but did not reply. Callento knew the answer, of course, just as he knew that Wanagi was not from Ibmem. And he admitted to himself that he might be bringing the same message if the new king had destroyed Lecren.

They passed the rest of the afternoon politely exchanging information between long periods of uncomfortable silence. Callento explained why he was late and how he got here, which greatly impressed Wanagi, and she repeated many times: "You ran through the badlands?" Later, she said, "I hope your run tired you out. I may have to fight you later." Callento wished that he had not met this troubled siar.

Later, as the sky darkened with twilight and gathering clouds, they bought some food from a roadside vendor and returned to the wall to eat. Ardel, the siars' patron moon of strength and endurance, glowed dimly through the clouds in the eastern sky. Its twin, Sidel, the patron of song, bravery, and loyalty, was likely in the southwest blocked from view by the castle.

As the sun set, a bell rang in the one of the castle's towers and a caller spoke again from above. The siars hurried away from the wall to listen. "...his gift from Saulax, the giver of life," the caller was saying. "Those who have lost faith, those who have fled Si Dyim, shall meet the Fire Witch. Behold!"

A brilliant light flew from the castle and raced across the sky like a bloated shooting star. It travelled

south, high above the River Road, and dropped below the horizon. A brighter light arose there and flickered for a few moments, then dimmed to a steady glow. A low rumble followed, then silence. Now the sky seemed very dark and still; then the stillness was shattered by the peal of the castle's brass war bells.

The people of the city cheered. The caller shouted praises to Saulax and the king, and the people cheered again—praises and cheers echoed throughout the city again and again. The fire on the horizon continued to glow like a minor sunset. Callento thought about the people, the families who had left the city this morning. Had this ball of flame killed them all? Then he thought of Maribahn and turned sharply to Wanagi. She had fallen to the ground, and now she sat there, ringing her fists at the sky. "You see?" she said to Callento. "The Fire Witch."

Callento sat beside her. They both watched the sky for a long time, but saw nothing more. Music and laughter drifted up from the city. Much later, they heard a woman's voice calling faintly from the castle ramparts. Someone was chanting a slow, sad tune, barely distinguishable to Callento. But Wanagi recognized it: "It's Dil Carvan. A royal dirge."

The sky was black, except for a bruise of light where Ardel tried to push through the thick clouds, and big drops of rain began to fall. The chanting stopped abruptly.

A troubadour handed Callento two poles and a sheet of oilcloth. The siars returned to the wall and set up a lean-to. In the quiet of the night,

Callento reflected on the disconcerting events of the day. Nothing was right, from the tournament to the fiery destruction of Maribahn, from the song of the purple piper to the Dil Carvan dirge. And the Fire Witch ... the Fire Witch.

•

In the privacy of his chamber, the Crimson King lounged on a sofa, toying with the fruit in a bowl on a side table. He picked up an apple and as he was about to bite into it, saw that it was green and threw it angrily at the wall across from him. The apple smashed on the frame of a painting of his namesake, Morec the Great, who had ruled Banisvahd more than a century ago, and bits of pulp smeared across his ancestor's belly. "I'm sorry," he said to the painting. His voice sounded too high for a king—he had grown accustomed to his speaker's fine baritone. "Never mind. I'll be greater than you."

A side door opened without a sound. The yellow-clad jester walked in like a water dancer and folded his legs over an ottoman. He smiled at the king and strummed his silent instrument.

"More royal justice meted out," he said. The king heard his voice as a soft whisper from behind.

A sphere of crystal hovered above the jester's instrument. Lightning crackled and hummed on its surface; a fire glowed in its misty interior. "Twice used," said the jester, "and five uses remain."

The king frowned. The presence of the Fire Witch in his chamber made him uncomfortable. He took a breath, as if to say something. "Don't speak," said the smiling jester. "Silence

is crimson," whispered the voice behind his ears. "Justice is blinding. Greatness is becoming. Change is good. This limp land is vibrant again with your energy. You are the red sky in morning."

The king had to smile. The jester laughed, a high-pitched, gulping sound that grated on the king. But he endured it, as he did everything about this odd, hairless being, for the jester had given him the power of the sun to use as he pleased. Five more times. He picked up another apple—a red one—and bit into it.

Verse Three: The Pattern Juggler

When morning broke the rain had diminished to a fine mist. Callento awoke alone and climbed out of the lean-to. He stretched and chanted a short prayer to Saulax, then stood for a while enjoying the feel of cool water on his nose and lips. Most of the others waiting by the gate were still asleep or just beginning to stir in their bedding. Callento pissed against the castle wall. The rain thinned and stopped, and a cool breeze wafted up the hill. The city below lay in quiet slumber, and everything seemed right again in this morning stillness. It was as if the events of the previous day were nothing more than a strange dream. He wondered where Wanagi had gone.

Callento walked down the road, hoping a vendor would be awake so he could buy some breakfast. He was passing by the troubadours' wagon

when he heard shouting down the hill. A group of rough-looking men were waving swords at a party of white-robed dignitaries, one of whom lay on the ground.

Without another thought, Callento charged down the hill. As he ran he counted the thieves: five, no, six. One of the thieves shouted, and three turned to meet him. Callento drew his sword, held it in both hands and sang silently to himself—he would not dignify these men by singing aloud.

The three men raised their swords unsteadily. Callento charged the man in the middle, knocked his sword up and turned into him with his shoulder. The man flew backward and slammed against the wheel of a vendor's wagon. Callento stopped dead and brought his sword down on the shoulder of the second thief, who yelped in pain and dropped to the ground. Then he spun round and met the sword of the third sharply with his own, knocking it from the man's grip. The thief watched his sword clatter to the road, then looked back to the siar with fear-bloated eyes. Callento slapped his ear with the flat of his sword and the man turned and ran.

When Callento swung about to face the others, two more were almost upon him. His song still strong in his mind, he parried a blow with his sword. The fourth thief's momentum carried him past and Callento swung his sword one-handed onto the back of the man's legs. The fifth, who had also skidded past him, now raised his sword hesitantly, more in defence than attack. Callento heard a scuffle and scream just behind him.

He turned half way to see the sixth thief pulling his sword from a white-clad body on the ground, while he held another by the wrist. "I'll kill them all!" His voice was filled with rage and fear.

But the thief lurched forward, grasping hopelessly over his shoulders, and fell at Callento's feet with a knife embedded in the back of his neck. Behind him, Wanagi raced up the hill, sword raised. The remaining thief dropped his sword and fled down the road. Callento pulled a stun-star from his belt and hurled it at him, striking him in the ass. The man staggered and fell unconscious on the road. "Good throw," said Wanagi, coming up beside him.

"And you," Callento replied.

"I never miss." She bent down and pulled her knife from the neck of the dead thief.

As they disarmed the wounded thieves and gathered them together, three of the white-robed dignitaries approached them, wearing appreciative smiles. One of them, the eldest, was obviously their leader. He wore a wide-brimmed hat, whereas all the others wore small, flat-topped caps.

"Praises to Saulax and the sea," he said, patting their shoulders. "Brave siars. I am Daggouse, and we are the sages of Lord Ilmawli the White of Si Rocke, summoned by King Morec to give counsel on the ways of the north and the sea. You did a great service for your king and country. What are your names?"

The siars introduced themselves and Daggouse looked quizzically at Wanagi. "You serve no lord?"

"I serve the people of Ilnem, by

grace of the fair moons."

"Oh, well, very good indeed. And you!" He patted Callento's shoulder again. "I've never seen a siar defeat so many at once. And without song!"

The old sage should have known that siars only sing in ceremonial combat, or out of respect for their opponent. Callento was about to explain, but someone cried out, "Daggouse, he's dead. Linaupe is dead."

Daggouse sagged, then glared at the wounded thieves. "You'll all be put to death!"

They all waited for the city police to come and take the thieves away, then walked up the road together to the castle gate. Still shut tight, and silent. But all of those waiting, including the brown chorus, were gone. One of the troubadours said, "The gate opened and shut. We called, but you didn't hear."

Callento pressed both hands over his face. Wanagi ran at the gate and hacked at it with her sword, then slumped against the massive planks.

"So eager to compete," said Daggouse. He nodded to one of his sages, who stepped forward and pulled a horn from under his robe. He blew a short staccato tune, then repeated it two octaves higher. Wanagi stepped back from the gate just as it began to open. Two red-armored guards came out and waved them in. Daggouse chuckled and said, "You may enter with us, of course."

Inside was a carnival. The street was crammed with people: royals, courtiers and officials being entertained by jugglers, magicians, acrobats, mimes and

artists. Curiously, there were no musicians, no music at all. Overhead, colorful banners spanned the street, and flags hung from balconies and windows—all the colors of the lords, except for green.

"Oh heed! Oh heed!" said Daggouse over and over, clapping his hands effusively. "This is marvelous."

Callento searched for signs of the tournament as the group made their way through the crowd. But there was not a siar to be seen, not even in the central courtyard. As they approached the palace, Daggouse touched their arms. "You will come with us to the king's court, where I will tell him of your bravery."

Callento protested; he just wanted to find the Lecren siars. But Daggouse insisted, adding, "When the king hears of your deed, he will surely allow you to enter the tournament a day late."

A pair of red guards admitted them to the palace after taking the siars' weapons. They led the group into the entrance hall, a cavernous room rimmed with a wide staircase to the second floor. The Si Dyim royal lineage decorated the walls, staring coldly down at the visitors. After a long wait, an escort came down the staircase. She wore a stiff red suit and a black bicorné hat. Smiling diplomatically, she said, "The king will see you now," and turned to lead them up the staircase. The sages fussed with each other's robes and hats, then followed the escort, with Callento and Wanagi behind.

The throne room was even larger than the entrance hall; evenly spaced

pillars held up the ceiling. The party entered from the side and waited behind a row of guards. The king sat in noble crimson on a high-backed throne. Attendants stood or kneeled on either side of him and a jester, dressed completely in yellow, sat on a cushion at one end of the dais. Lords, ladies and courtiers stood around the periphery of the room.

Everyone was watching a juggler and a small orchestra performing in the center of the room. Callento didn't notice them at first, then he thought he had gone deaf, for though the musicians played their instruments, they made no sounds; but he could hear people clearing their throats or shuffling their feet. The orchestra sat in a semicircle, and in its center, the juggler tossed an assortment of colored shapes into the air. He was tall and slender, and wore a long, tubular hat that exaggerated his height. He danced fluidly on the spot beneath the shapes, and colorful patterns on his suit and hat seemed to coalesce and reshape as he moved. Everything about him was in constant motion. Callento watched the shapes change in the air above the juggler. He realized that the juggler was not tossing the shapes but gesticulating below them—the shapes were changing all by themselves. When finally the juggler spread his arms apart, the shapes dissolved into air, and the orchestra lowered their instruments. The juggler bowed to the king, who smiled and clasped his hands together. All his attendants stood and applauded, and so did everyone else in the hall.

The sages joined in enthusiastically,

the siars somewhat hesitantly. "Pure magic," said Daggouse. Callento was beginning to wonder if the world had suddenly gone crazy. Or if he had. He did not always understand the ways of the lords. But there was more strangeness here than he had ever seen before. And where had the music gone?

While the orchestra packed their equipment out of the hall, the sages' escort stepped into the center, bowed to the king and announced: "Gracious king, Lord of all Banisvahd, at your request, I present the Wise Men of Si Rocke."

Daggouse and his party stepped forward. Callento could only hear scraps of the old sage's words to the king: "...naval strategies ... northern borders..." He introduced each one of his party, and then he described the assault and rescue outside the castle. "They might have killed more of us," said Daggouse so that the whole court could hear him, "but for these noble siars." He waved them in. "May I present Callento of Lecren and Wanagi of Ilnem."

The guards moved aside and the two siars walked across the terrazzo map of Banisvahd to the dais. Both noticed that Maribahn was not marked on the map, and Callento sensed that Wanagi was barely able to control herself. Daggouse ushered them before the king, where they bowed low to him. "There were at least a dozen thieves," said Daggouse, "and these two killed or captured all but one. And without song."

The king leaned forward. "Without song?" said the speaker. The king whispered something to the speaker.

"Noble indeed," he said to the siars, "to fight without song—"

But Wanagi interrupted. "We only sing out of respect for our opponents," she said, "in fair an honorable combat." The whole court tensed—a siar should not be speaking this way to the king, if at all. "But you wouldn't know that, evil lord!" She pulled a knife from her sleeve and hurled it at the king, screaming, "Here, for Maribahn!"

The knife flew straight for the king's head, but just in front of his face it veered and struck the throne beside his left ear. Callento grabbed Wanagi's wrist as she began singing, "Maribahn shines..." He kicked her leg with a force that should have knocked her off her feet, but she did not fall. "...with emerald fire..." Wanagi wrenched her arm free with surprising strength, and pulled out another knife. Callento returned the song and leaned into her with all his weight, "May Sidel light your path..." throwing Wanagi off balance before she could throw the second knife "...kissed by the sea..." Then he grabbed her arm again, "and Ardel ease your journey..."

While they struggled, a pair of red guards hurried the king away to his chamber; others rushed into the fray as the sages fled. "...and sun's—" Wanagi jerked forward, back arched, and crumpled to the floor with Callento on top of her.

They lay together for a moment. Callento could feel the strength draining from her. "Never miss," Wanagi breathed into his ear. Then the guards pulled him off. Wanagi lay on her side with a lance in her back.

A lake of blood flooded over Si Dyim territory on the terrazzo map.

The guards crowded around, two holding Callento's arms, and they watched the blood run out of her. "Loyalty ... cannot be traded..." Wanagi sang, spluttering blood. She wheezed and gurgled, then fell silent.

"...only betrayed," Callento finished for her.

The lake of blood spread outwards, threatening to cover the neighboring territories.

The jester slipped through the circle of guards and leaned close to Wanagi's body. As he examined it, the horns of his cap swayed listlessly. He touched her shoulder with his forefinger and pushed it, as if to see if she were still alive. But the lance kept her body from lying flat. The jester looked up at Callento and frowned in the exaggerated fashion of a mime.

The Crimson King turned a small knife in his right hand as his speaker announced, "By our royal command, anyone in the city wearing the color of Maribahn shall be publicly executed." The speaker handed a roll of paper to a kneeling guard, who then rose and marched from the court. With the knife, the king waved Lord Trurah the Blue to come before him.

The speaker said, "Lord Trurah of Lecren, explain your siar's relationship with the Green Siar."

"My king," said Lord Trurah, "Callento is my Best Siar, loyal to both his lord and his king. He met the Green for the first time outside the castle, only as they rescued the sages of Si Rocke. He knew nothing of her evil

intentions, just as the wise men and your guards knew nothing. He did subdue the assassin, as any loyal siar would, in time for your guards to arrive."

The king looked to the jester, who simply smiled from his cushion, then whispered to his speaker. "He fought well," said the speaker, "though you must caution him about singing."

Lord Trurah nodded in agreement, and the speaker continued: "Your siar has earned a place of honor in Castle Si Dyim. We will acknowledge him at the Pronouncement of Captains." The king dismissed Lord Trurah with a casual wave while he continued to play with the knife.

The jester whistled softly and studied his instrument. In it the image of the Blue Siar walked along the castle ramparts.

Verse Four: The Yellow Jester

Callento leaned on a parapet and looked out over the city. A soft drizzle fell from the morning sky, making the countryside look flat and grey. Now and then, police whistles and faint cries rose up from the still streets of the city—the police were busy for so early in the day. But these small distractions could not stop Callento's thoughts from returning to Wanagi's attempted assassination of the king. He secretly wished the Green Siar had succeeded—maybe that's why he had reacted so slowly. Wanagi had thrown her knife with deadly accuracy ... but for that inexplicable

swerve the knife would not have missed.

Callento had spent the night in the dungeon, while the king considered his fate, he supposed. Lord Trurah had come to see him there last night, and Callento told him all about his journey and his meeting Wanagi outside the castle. Trurah could not hide his sorrow when Callento retold Wanagi's story about the destruction of Maribahn. He told Callento that there was no tournament, and that he would explain it all to him tomorrow on the eastern rampart. This news did not surprise Callento, with all the craziness that was going on here; but despite his lord's confidence, he half expected to be executed in the morning. Instead, the guards released him and even returned his weapons.

Trurah soon arrived, a little out of breath, but quite happy with himself. Callento bowed low. "My lord," he said.

"Rise, siar." Lord Trurah patted his shoulders. "The king will honor you today at the Pronouncement of Captains." He laughed at Callento's puzzled expression. "The king now credits you with saving his life. Indeed you did—you reacted before any of his own guards. Your night in the dungeon was a misunderstanding."

"They did not kill her honorably."

"Honor seems to have fled this land with the banishment of the tournament." Lord Trurah looked around furtively. No one else was on the ramparts, except for a few guards making rounds on the opposite wall. But he spoke quietly anyway. "Morec has such fearsome power that he no longer needs the tournament. He

contrived this fiction for two reasons: first and most important, to lure all the lords and their siars here; and second, to distract the populace long enough to lay the foundation of his army."

"Army?"

"Morec's ambitions lie far beyond the borders of Banisvahd. He wants to conquer the world. And he has the power of the sun to help him. With the Fire Witch and a united army, he may be able to do it. All the siars of Banisvahd will be his captains and you will recruit your troops from your own castles. The king has the full support of the lords (all of us still alive, that is) and we have pledged our siars to him."

Callento dropped to one knee and clutched the handle of his gut-knife. "Lord, please—"

"You are not betraying your loyalty." Lord Trurah put a hand on his siar's shoulder. "Up now, I need you alive, Best Siar." He looked out over the city. "The king has changed everything. No more ritual combat. No more songs."

"No songs?" said Callento. "Ever again?" He had accepted the end of the tournament, albeit with some sorrow; but for the king to declare an end to music was unbelievable, unconscionable.

Trurah leaned closer. "Morec is not himself," he said. "And I think the jester has much to do with it. He seems to have some influence over the king, though I've never heard him speak. His silence is infectious, for the king has certainly lost his voice. And why Morec's sudden aversion to music? Is it because the jester never

plays his instrument? Morec used to adore music, especially the operas. He loved singing..."

"The jester doesn't look like us," said Callento. That hairless face frowning over Wanagi's body stuck in his mind.

"He's not from here, it's plain," said Trurah. "I don't yet understand his motives, but he is somehow directing the king's course." He pointed to a column of smoke rising from the Canto Forest. "See there. Rapid change is like a fire, and like fire, it can get out of control. But the gentle rain that falls now has slowed the fire down, and will eventually put it out."

They watched the smoke for a long time, then Callento said, "You are the rain, my lord?"

Lord Trurah smiled, but said nothing more about it. Instead, he explained what to expect in the Pronouncement of Captains. "You will hold a place of honor in the King's new army," he said. "I need you there, Callento, for the sake of Lecren and of Banisvahd." The siar bowed to his lord and restated his pledge of loyalty. "That's all I need for now, Best Siar." And Trurah left Callento there to digest all that he had told him.

Callento stayed on the rampart for a while, watching the column of smoke that rose from the spot where the Fire Witch had destroyed the caravan that had left the city. Peasant families, most from Maribahn holdings, burned to death for a show of royal power. Callento wondered if Lord Trurah actually had a plan to set the rain upon King Morec's fire, or if

he was waiting for some natural force to intervene.

He made his way down from the rampart thinking about the role he would play in this new world. What if the king asked for his complete loyalty? Could he serve a madman?

In the central courtyard, he saw Daggouse, the white sage, laughing with robed men from other castles. One of them said, "What do you call a stubborn Green?" And after a pause, he said, "A cinder." They all laughed. Daggouse saw him and called him over. He introduced him as his deliverer, and did not mention Wanagi. Callento politely answered questions, then asked Daggouse for a word in private.

They stepped away from the others, and Callento asked: "What do you think of these changes?"

Daggouse answered without hesitation. "Don't try to understand the ways of kings, dear Callento. All you need to know is that our Crimson King is riding the crest of a great wave to a brave new shore. We can ride it with him, or drown in his wash." The old sage patted Callento's shoulder and returned to his friends.

Callento continued on to the servants' tower. Lord Trurah had told him to follow the blue flags to Lecren's rooms. He entered the building thinking more of his reunion with his fellow siars than the words of Daggouse or even Trurah. They would be in their rooms preparing for the Pronouncement of Captains. He climbed the stairs to the third floor. Callento's boots echoed in the empty hallway. He turned a corner and almost bumped into the yellow jester.

The jester pushed his hairless face close to Callento's and studied him with large green eyes. All the horns on his cap pointed at him, their green bells looking like many more eyes. The jester's lanky body filled the hallway, and every part of it moved, slowly and smoothly, like branches in a breeze.

Callento stepped back and bowed with arms spread. "I wish to pass by," he said, flatly. The jester neither spoke nor moved aside. "Let me pass, jester."

"Yesss," hissed the yellow man, but his voice seemed too close even in the confines of the hallway. "Our king will like you," whispered the voice.

Callento looked over his shoulder, expecting another to be there, for the jester's lips had not moved. Then he recovered himself and started to say, "I must pass," but the jester stopped him before he uttered a word.

"Don't speak," said the voice. And a conflagration of images roared into Callento's mind: fire burning hot through forest, town, and castle, people burning, thousands of people, siars, lords and ladies, courtiers and peasants; these images accompanied by music similar to the purple piper's, but by unfamiliar instruments, and keeping time to the fleeing, burning, falling bodies of the people; and a voice joined in, softly chanting, "Change is a fire, you are the fuel, burning, crackling all. Change is our music, you are our instruments. We play, we watch, we listen. Change excites us. Change entertains us. Change is good."

When Callento recovered from this sensual assault, he found himself pressed against the wall with the jester smiling in front of him. Now he felt the fire of his anger burning to the surface. He clutched the hilt of his dagger. This close he could strike before the jester could move. "She didn't miss," said the voice. "We protected him then. But next time...?"

Callento left his dagger sheathed, straightened up. He sang loudly, "Lecren blue, great sky and sea..." and pushed passed the jester, who slid lithely aside. "River water calls to me..." His voice bounced off the walls as he marched down the hall. Still, that strange whisper seemed so close to his ear.

"You," whispered the voice in his ear. "Yes, you. Our instrument of change."

Finale: The Dance of the Puppets

The Crimson King danced with his queen over the tile map of his kingdom. The lords and ladies, courtiers, captains and escorts surrounded the dancing couple, cheering them on, applauding their grand gestures, laughing at the king's antics. Then he waved for others to join in and the dance floor filled with bodies, swirling over the terrazzo landscape like a great storm.

The Red orchestra played on mutely, the Brown choir mouthed the words. The only sounds were footsteps on marble and the occa-

sional outburst of laughter.

Callento, Captain of the First Army of Banisvahd, stood with his fellow captains on the periphery of the dance floor. He wore a red sash over his blue uniform. As he watched the dance, he felt a large knot tightening in his stomach, especially when Lord Trurah and the Lady Evineruge passed by. They smiled at him, and Callento tried to return it convincingly. He told himself that his lord was a diplomat and that he did this for the sake of Lecren and Banisvahd.

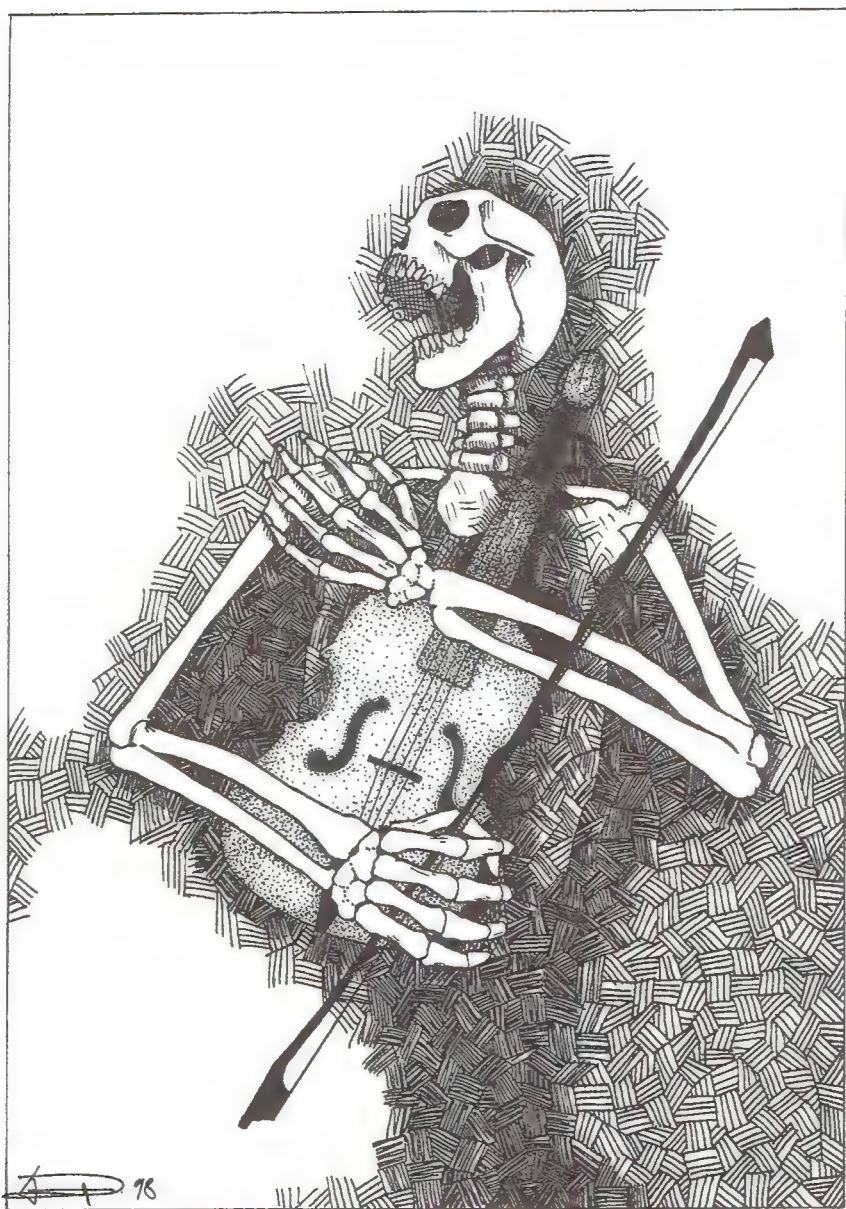
Callento lifted the red-ribboned medal from his chest, the one that the

king had awarded him for saving his life. But it was not he who had saved the king, and that knowledge at once consoled and frightened him. *Our instrument of change.*

Through the silent carousel of bodies he saw flashes of yellow. From across the room, the jester stepped nimbly into the center of the dance, a comic grin on his bare face, his instrument slung over his shoulder. There he turned, with arms outstretched, the hub in this silent wheel, and he watched the dancers with the eyes in his head, the eyes in his horned cap. ♣

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: GERALD L. TRUSCOTT has been an editor, publisher and writer for over 15 years. He was co-founder of Tesseract Books and co-edited *Tesseract's*³ with Candas Jane Dorsey. He has published a few SF stories over the years and thinks that "Crimson King" just might mark the beginning of a more prolific phase as a writer.

ABOUT THE ARTIST: TIM HAMMELL reports that the January/February issue of *Airbrush Action Magazine* will feature a major article they requested him to write on crossover art. The style for the illustration for "In the Court of the Crimson King" was inspired by the medieval feel of the story and the fact that Tim is currently reading *The History of Art*: pictures of medieval woodcuts and religious icons were in his head. He says: "Originally the piper's pipe was going to be a flute or invented instrument until I saw a picture of the serpent musical instrument. Trying to suggest that the illo was done in the period by an apprentice artist, hence the the slightly odd touch to it and, as the story is an alternate world, not making the woodcut look exactly medieval (the figure of the piper outside the frame with no lower legs indicated). Since I didn't actually have any of the albums listed by the author I put on the closest thing I had—Loreena McKennitt's *Book of Secrets* and the soundtrack for *Braveheart*. Both quite haunting music, and a story about the 'end of music' is quite hauntingly melancholy."



Suggested Listening:

I envision my story taking place in the 1950s. While a classical piece might be more suitable to the style of the story, considering it features the violin, I can hear "Green Onions" by Booker T. and the MGs playing in the background inside the music store in the first scene. Then it would slowly fade in again at the end

Instrument of Death

Edo van Belkom

illustrated by Warren Layberry

"My uncle owned it for years," the man in the grey suit said as he lifted the black leather case on top of the counter. "Always kept it in his bedroom closet and never played it."

Andre Goldstein ran his wrinkled hands over the hard smooth surface of the violin case. It was an old case, handmade, but in excellent condition, as if it had been regularly oiled and hand-rubbed through the ages. If the case was any indication of the quality of the instrument inside...

"I asked him if he ever played it," the man in the grey suit continued, "and he said, 'Only twice.'"

Andre was used to hearing people tell him stories about the instruments they brought into his store. For some reason they thought a few anecdotes about an instrument would help increase its value. Of course it never did. Not for Andre. He dealt in musical instruments. "Stories," he would say, "are bought and sold at the used bookstore down the block."

And yet, Andre found himself listening carefully to the man's tale, his fingers casually stroking the case's mirrorlike surface as if it were a favorite cat.

"So I said, 'What's the matter, don't you like the way it sounds?' and he shook his head at me and said, 'It makes the most beautiful music in the world.'" The man in the grey suit put his hands to his temples as if simply recalling the conversation was giving him a headache. "So I asked him why he only played it twice. If it made such good music, then he should be playing it all the time, right?"

Andre nodded.

"He looked at me ... looked me straight in the eye and said, 'Because the music it makes, kills.'"

Andre lifted his fingers from the case as if it had suddenly become hot to the touch.

"That's when I knew for sure he was just a crazy old man. Music doesn't kill, music soothes the savage beast, right?"

Again Andre nodded.

"I even tried to play a few notes on it to prove to him that the violin couldn't kill. But just as I was about to draw the bow across the strings, he broke down in front of me, crying like a baby and begging me not to do it. Begging me... Can you believe that? A man that age?"

Normally Andre would answer such a question with something like, "Not really," or "It's very hard to believe," but instead he just looked at the man in the grey suit and said, "And so what did you do?"

He shrugged. "What could I do with the crazy fool? I put the violin back in its case, put the case back in the closet, and left an old man alone with his paranoid delusions."

"So, may I ask how it comes to be in your possession?"

"My uncle died a couple of weeks ago—God rest his soul—and he left me the violin."

"You don't want it, I presume?"

The man in the grey suit shook his head. "Nah, I don't play. So, I figured I can either put it away in a closet like my uncle did, or I can see what it's worth."

"I see," said Andre, his hands drawn to the case once more.

"And let's face it," the man continued

with a nervous laugh. "Times being what they are, I could use the money, right?"

"Oh, absolutely," said Andre. "People can always find a use for money."

"Exactly."

Andre put his other hand gently on the case and turned it around so the two brass latches on either side of the handle were facing him. He undid the latches, then using nothing more than the middle fingers of each hand, he lifted the case open.

He resisted the urge to gasp.

The violin was obviously the work of a master. It had a deep full body, and the soundboard, fingerboard and tailpiece were all made of a rich dark wood that was a color halfway between mahogany and ebony. But most interesting of all were the rib and scroll of the instrument, both of which were adorned with delicate inlay work. Andre had seen such decorations once before on a Greffuhle violin made by Antonio Stradivari in the early 1700s. But the decoration on that violin had consisted of simple designs made up of swirling lines that were interesting to look at but, as a whole, created no real image. The decorations on this violin, however, were intricate images of dancing satyrs, some of them playing instruments of their own.

The violin was priceless, belonging not in Goldstein's Music House, but in a museum somewhere, maybe even the conservatory. Yet here was Andre's chance to own a violin hundreds of years old. He couldn't discern a maker's mark but, judging by the detail alone, it had to have been made by a pupil of Nicola Amati in Cremona, of

which Stradivari was but one of many. So, what does one offer for such a valuable instrument?

"It's very nice," Andre said evenly, with no hint of the excitement that was bubbling inside him. "Very nice."

Andre took the violin from its case, marveling at how smooth and cool it felt to the touch. He nestled the violin into place, clamped his chin down on the rest, and picked up the bow. Like the violin itself, the bow was well-made and finely balanced. In fact, everything about the instrument felt *right*.

He drew the bow over the strings to see if it was in tune. Somehow, after years of neglect sitting in the back of some closet, it had remained perfectly in tune.

Truly an amazing instrument. A work of art in and of itself.

He looked at the man in the grey suit, sizing him up. What would he take for it? What would he be happy with? He obviously didn't know anything about music or musical instruments. If he did, he wouldn't have come to Andre's store first. He was middle-aged, with either a wife and a few children to support, or many women and several vices to feed. Either way he'd probably be glad to have a few hundred dollars for it. But Andre didn't want him coming back angry in a few weeks when he realized what the violin was really worth. And if he offered too much, it might tip the man off as to its real value and he'd end up taking it somewhere else. In the end, he decided on a figure that was a little less than fair.

"I'll give you two thousand."

The face of the man in the grey suit suddenly lit up, as he no doubt thought

he'd just won the lottery. Then after a few moments his smile waned and he said, "Dollars, right?"

"Yes," Andre nodded. "Dollars."

"Then you got yourself a deal, mister." He extended his hand and the two men shook, finalizing the transaction.

Andre allowed a rare smile to break over his face. He hadn't wanted to show any emotion over the purchase, but he couldn't help it. He'd just made the acquisition of a lifetime and knew he could get his investment back twenty, thirty, maybe even a hundred times over at auction.

"Do you mind if I play it?" Andre asked.

"No, go ahead. Two thousand bucks, wow!"

Andre raised the violin into place and began playing the opening bars to a concerto by Vivaldi. After a few tentative moments of growing accustomed to the tension of the strings and balance of the bow, Andre settled down and played the piece in earnest...

And was absolutely amazed by what he heard.

The music flowed through his fingers and blossomed up through the instrument's soundboard as if it were a living thing.

Andre felt dizzy as tears began to well up in his eyes. All his life he'd longed to play so well. In his younger years he'd tried, practicing for hours every morning and night. But no matter how hard he worked at it, he was never able to play well enough to earn a place with the symphony.

He'd never had the gift.

But he had it now. With this violin, he felt he could play as well as

any soloist. Perhaps he could try again, revive his ambitions, renew his dreams...

Andre continued to play, filling the shop with gloriously beautiful music. He glanced over at the man in the grey suit and smiled. The man's head was swaying back and forth in time to the music, obviously enjoying the rich, sweet sound. His hand moved too, counting out the slow rhythm of the piece like a conductor.

Andre played on.

And suddenly the man's head snapped back and his hand jumped to his chest, clutching at it.

Andre stopped playing. "Are you all right?" he said. "What's wrong?"

The man did not answer. He was too busy gasping for breath.

Andre put the violin in its case and ran toward the man.

Too late.

By the time he got there, the man had dropped heavily to the floor. Andre put a hand on the man's neck to feel for a pulse. There was none.

"My God," Andre gasped.

The man was dead.

He had died in his store, while Andre had played...

Andre rose slowly, his head spinning. It was an unnatural and unsettling feeling, but obviously the result of the absolute euphoria he felt over playing the instrument so well.

The feeling would pass.

The man on the floor however, wouldn't be going anywhere.

Andre looked over at the violin sitting in its case and slowly shook his head in horror. "No!" he whispered. It couldn't be. It was impossible. Surely it was nothing more than a terrible

coincidence, some cruel twist of fate.

Andre turned and looked at the man in the grey suit lying prone on the floor of his shop, his eyes turned up and his lips slightly parted as if frozen in a cry of pain. He was overweight and probably smoked like a chimney. Yes, Andre had seen his kind before. He ate rich, fatty foods and never exercised. He lived every day as if it were his last, and that's what killed him! It was his own damn fault and had nothing to do with the violin and the ridiculous story he told about his uncle.

Andre let out a nervous laugh and rubbed an open hand across his forehead. He took a deep breath and let out a long sigh. Then he went to the counter, closed the violin case and took it into one of the back rooms. He locked it securely inside the room, then returned to the front of the shop, picked up the phone and dialed 911.

The authorities took over his shop for about an hour, examining the scene, then removing the body in a white body bag. Andre gave the police quite a detailed account of how he had been talking to the man about the opening movement in *Mozart's Magic Flute* when the man started grabbing at his chest. "I tried to make the man comfortable," Andre told them, "But he was dead before I could do anything for him."

The two policemen simply nodded throughout the story, and both seemed more than satisfied with it. Why wouldn't they be? If Andre had given them a choice between the story he told them and what actually happened, which one would they believe? Besides, he wasn't about to tell them the

whole story. If he did, he'd have to give up the violin to the man's family, and he didn't want to do that—not when it allowed him to play such beautiful music.

"If you need any more help," said Andre as he walked the police to the door, "you know where to find me, huh?"

"I don't think we'll be needing anything else, Mr. Goldstein," said the younger one. "You've been very helpful. Thank you."

Andre simply smiled and held the door open for the two men. When they were gone, he glanced at his watch. Well past closing time. He closed the door to the shop, locked it, and pulled down the blinds. Then he went into the back room and took the violin from its case.

It was just as beautiful as ever, the wood even darker than he remembered. It was his now, coming into his possession free of charge by an almost unbelievable set of circumstances.

That could only mean one thing.

The violin was meant to belong to him. It was destined to be his and he would play it even if he were the only one to ever hear its wondrous music.

And so, alone in the room, he took the instrument from its case, positioned it under his chin, and once again began to play. He played another Vivaldi concerto, this one livelier and more difficult to play than the first. Andre had never been able to master the delicate fingerings the piece required, but now his fingers simply flew over the strings, hitting their marks with precision and giving the music wings.

Andre was overcome by rapture as he and the violin took flight, leaving the

confines of the little back room and journeying to a place he'd never been before. It was a magical, mystical place where he and the instrument were one and the music was as close to perfection as any man could make...

All except for the sound of the car tires screeching.

That and the crash.

Andre's wings were suddenly clipped and he fell through the clouds ... falling, falling back to earth where it all came to an abrupt end in the dingy back room of his shop.

Outside, people were screaming and calling for help. He could hear them through the window that opened onto the alley behind the store.

"God, no!" said Andre under his breath.

He put the violin down, and steadied himself a moment. Like before, he felt dizzy again, but this time there was also a dull throbbing pain deep inside his head. He waited a few seconds for the pain to subside, then climbed up on a chair to peer out through the open window. He had to strain to look down the alley at the street beyond, but he could see well enough.

A young woman on the sidewalk had been hit by a car.

Andre had heard the crash.

And the woman...

The woman had heard the violin.

Andre got down from the window and slumped down on the chair. A hard lump of fear and regret slowly began to grow in the pit of his stomach. He looked at the violin. Such an evil thing, giving him so much pleasure and causing others so much pain.

How could he play it again?

He put the violin back in its case

and put the case at the very back of a storage closet, out of sight and out of mind.

Then he locked the closet, vowing *never* to play the instrument again.

But *never* is such a harsh word.

So cruelly final and absolute.

And *never* is such a long time, too, especially when you spend every day of *never-playing-the-instrument-again*, thinking of a way to play it without getting somebody killed.

And so for Andre, *never* turned out to be just short of six months. When June came and the leaves begun to bud, he dug the violin out of the closet, tucked it under his arm and closed up the shop for two full weeks.

Then he headed north.

Far north.

"Why would you want to come up here in June?" asked the pilot as he put the Piper Super Cub into a shallow left turn and searched the ground below for a lake to set down on. "There's nobody around for miles."

"Just the way I like it," said Andre.

"There's nothing but moose and black flies this time of year," said the pilot over the constant, reassuring drone of the engine. "And not much moose if you get my meaning."

Andre smiled. "The flies won't be bothering me."

The pilot looked at Andre, his eyes traveling up and down his form as if he were assessing his sanity. Finally, he just shrugged his shoulders. "Whatever you say."

Andre said nothing in reply. Instead he tightened his grip on the black leather case resting on his lap in preparation for the landing.

The pilot decided on a small lake nestled between two sharply inclined slopes covered with stunted coniferous trees. The sight of it pleased Andre, reminding him that the closest human being was hundreds of miles away.

He would be happy here.

The landing went smoothly. Minutes later, Andre and the pilot were unloading his supplies onto shore. The pilot took care of getting everything off the plane, then helped Andre carry it all to the small circular clearing at the southern edge of the lake.

The mosquitoes and black flies seemed to swarm around them like angry bees.

"You sure you want to do this?" the pilot asked one last time as he swatted at the bugs crawling over his neck and buzzing past his ears.

"Of course I'm sure," Andre said, hardly noticing the insects. "I've never been more sure of anything in my life. Now go away! Quickly!"

The pilot shook his head. "All right, then," he said, with a tone suggesting he was convinced of Andre's madness. "See you in two weeks."

Fourteen days later, the Piper Super Cub took to the air minutes after the sun had peeked over of the eastern horizon. The crazy old man had probably had his fill of the north and would be waiting for him on the shore with his bags packed and a shit-eatin' so-happy-to-see-you grin on his face.

That is of course, if hadn't already been eaten alive by the black flies. Crazy old sonuvabitch from the city talked about two weeks in the territories as if he'd be camping out in his backyard.

The pilot laughed at that.

Good thing the man had paid cash in advance.

He looked out the window, down past the left pontoon and made another check of his position. Another couple of minutes and he'd be there.

Usually these city folk had the good sense to at least bring some insect repellent or bug spray with them. None of them sprays worked for shit, but at least they brought it with them like they were worried about the bugs. But instead of bug spray, this old fool had stocked up on violin strings and wood oil. What a nut!

He checked his bearings again and recognized the outline of the tiny lake he'd set down on two weeks earlier. The lake itself looked the same, but something about the land around it was different somehow.

He lowered his left wing and dropped down a few hundred feet for a closer look. As he neared the south end of the lake he could see the details of the landscape more clearly, but he still wasn't sure what he was looking at.

The color at that end of the lake was off.

Wrong somehow.

He continued skimming the lake, rapidly approaching the clearing where the old man had pitched his tent.

And the sharper the whole scene became, the less the pilot believed what he was seeing.

At the edge of the clearing, a moose lay on its side, dead and quite bloated from the heat of the sun. The trees around the clearing for about a hundred yards in each direction had turned brown, as if some toxic

chemical had crept its way into the water table. Obviously the trees were dead. Closest to the clearing their needles were a rusty brown hue, but further away, they slowly turned a paler shade of brown, then light green. Finally, at about two hundred meters, the light green color gave way to a darker, more healthy, shade of green.

The pilot dipped his wing again as he passed over the clearing to ensure he got a good look at the campsite.

He searched the area closely, but the man was nowhere in sight. The pilot leveled the plane's wings and checked the sky in front of him only to realize he'd run out of room faster than he'd anticipated. He pushed the throttle forward and pulled back on the stick to avoid the tops of the trees on the southern slope.

Then with clear sky all around, he decided to circle back for another pass.

As he came in over the lake a second time, the old man was still nowhere to be seen. Maybe he wandered off, the pilot thought. Or got eaten by a bear.

He brought the plane in for a landing and taxied toward the campsite. When he got out of the plane, he was overcome by a strange feeling, a feeling of something not being right.

And then he realized that there were no black flies or mosquitoes buzzing around.

Weird.

"Mr. Goldstein!" the pilot shouted, as he walked through the campsite. "Hello!"

No answer.

He searched the perimeter of the camp and looked through the trees, but couldn't see any sign of the old man.

He turned and headed back toward the plane when he stumbled upon a pair of legs sticking out from between a formation of rocks.

"Mr. Goldstein?" the pilot said, kneeling down beside the body. He touched the old man's hand. It was cold and stiff. He rolled the body over with the toe of his boot and saw the blood.

"Christ!"

It had flowed out of his ears and run down his neck as if something had burst inside his head. From the looks of it, the old man had suffered a painful death, but there was this big smile on his face like he hadn't even known he was dying.

Maybe he never knew it.

The pilot stood up, rolled the body back onto its stomach and took a look around.

That's when he saw the violin. It was about a foot away, its dark underside gleaming in the sunlight.

The pilot picked up the instrument and, while looking it over, remembered that his sister's kid had been bugging her for a fiddle for years now. A violin was like a fiddle. Maybe he could learn to play on this thing?

The pilot pried the bow from the corpse's hand, then went looking for the instrument's case. When he found it, he carefully put the instrument inside, then hid the case on the plane.

He made a final tour of the campsite in search of anything else of value, packed a few things onto the plane, and took off.

When he got back to base he'd have to report the old man's death to the RCMP, maybe even fly them up to the campsite. Then, after all of that was taken care of, he'd be able to pay a visit to his sister.

The thought of it made him smile.

Won't she be happy when she sees what I brought for the boy! 🍁

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: EDO VAN BELKOM is the author of the novels *Wyrms Wolf*, *Lord Soth* and *Mister Magick*, and over 120 stories of science fiction, fantasy, horror and mystery. His first short story collection, *Death Drives a Semi*, will be published by Quarry Press this summer. His most recent book, *Northern Dreamers: Interviews with Canadian Authors of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror*, is a Spring 1998 title from Quarry. Edo lives in Brampton, Ontario. His web page is located at <http://www.horror.net.com/belkom.htm>

ABOUT THE ARTIST: WARREN LAYBERRY is an Ottawa writer, publisher and freelance illustrator. He can be reached for comment at <spider@freenet.carleton.ca>. Warren tends to listen to classical music when doing an illustration: Philip Glass, Carl Orff or Gustav Holst. For this particular illustration, though, he turned to *Danse Macabre* by Camille Saint Saens.

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Suggested Listening:
"Tangled Up in Blue" by Bob Dylan

Patience

Michael Vance

illustrated by Ronn Sutton

They found the girl on the road, crumpled beside a dead pony. In the middle of the road—or Bowes wouldn't even have stopped. Not because he had to get anywhere fast. Not because he was afraid. Not because he knew he couldn't help her. He just didn't care.

"Whoa, whoa," he called to the horse, pulling up on the reins. "Easy there, for crissake." The wagon shuddered to a stop, and he sat there, staring at the girl. What the hell was her problem? He heard a shuffling from inside the wagon and a second later Jonas poked his head up to take a look around. Jonas said nothing, just stared stupidly. Of course.

"She dead, you think?" Bowes asked, pointlessly. If she was, he'd have to move her, and the horse too. Christ, what a pain in the ass that would be. He started up out of the driver's seat, handing the reins to Jonas; it was then that he saw her move, saw her roll her head to one side to stare at him through a glassy eye. "Move that fuckin' horse," he told her, relieved now that he might not have to do the job after all. Inside the wagon he had a gun—useless now, since he had no bullets; but he thought of going for it just the same, to maybe get her moving.

"S-s-s-s-dead," Jonas stammered, his head working wildly with the effort of the words. "S-s-s-s-s-dead," he said again.

"Shut up, Jonas," Bowes said dully, striding forward. To hell with the gun. He wouldn't need it here. The girl probably wouldn't even know what it was

supposed to be, anyway. "I said move your ass, goddammit," he shouted as he approached her. The eye followed him, but still she didn't move. Now Bowes began to get annoyed. He was afraid he was going to have to hurt her.

The horse, Bowes noted with dismay, was genuinely dead. No chance it was going to be moving on its own. He cursed it roundly.

"He carried me ten thousand miles," the girl said finally, slicing into his tirade and dragging herself into a sitting position. "I got him from my parents, a long, long time ago. He was still trying to carry me when he died—even after he lay down, his legs kept on moving, even when he was dead. He didn't want to leave me out here. Poor Red." Fresh tears began to streak her dirty face. Bowes looked at—Red? The animal was black. Well, he decided—why not? What's in a name?

"Christ," he said tiredly. "Get up in the wagon. Come on! Up with Jonas there—he won't bite you; he's too damned stupid. I'm not even going to try to move your friend here—the rats can have him. I just might be able to get the wagon around him, though. Goddammit, I can't afford another mouth to feed!" He kicked wildly at a clump in the road, missed, and nearly fell down. The girl giggled. So Bowes kicked again, this time smashing the clump into a million pieces, which shut the kid up. He glared at her as he strode back to the wagon. He'd leave her, he decided. There was no way he could afford to drag her along with him. He steeled himself for

it, pictured himself beating her away from the wagon as he drove by the body of her fallen transport. It wouldn't be the worst he'd done.

Except, he found that she was already sitting up in the driver's seat when he got there. She stared at the body of the pony, her face glum. Goddamn it to hell.

Bowes climbed up beside her, took the reins from Jonas, who was studying the girl closely. "Get in the back," Bowes grated, and Jonas' head disappeared. The girl did not move, and Bowes grunted in annoyance. "I said get in the back. Hurry up now." He paused briefly, contemplated shoving her off onto the road. "You—" "Patience," she said, looking him in the eye.

"What?"

"Patience," she repeated. "My name."

"Oh," Bowes responded, and started the wagon moving again, around the dead pony.

"He doesn't talk?" Patience asked, a day later, inclining her head toward Jonas, who was busy sucking water out of a rusted tin container. I hope he dies of poisoning, Bowes thought, watching disgustedly.

"Not much," Bowes admitted. "He's shy, especially with women. You can guess why. Sometimes, though, he never shuts up, just goes all day long, about nothing at all. I've come close to killing him several times, when he gets like that. Too fucking stupid to know any better, though. It's his DNA," Bowes pronounced wisely. "It's fucked. Fallout

dust. Radioactive shit. Stuff rewrites your code. Turns you into one of these." He gestured toward Jonas, who had his head cocked slightly to one side now, as if listening to the conversation. Bowes flicked a rock at the other man, bounced it off Jonas' forehead. Jonas didn't move. "You see that? There's nothing there—he's just an imbecile."

"He family of yours, then?"

Bowes squinted at the girl. Just what the hell did she mean by that? "Do we look like family?" he demanded. The idea scared the hell out of him. He almost fainted with relief when Patience shook her head.

"I didn't mean that," she explained, as if speaking to a small child. "I just meant—you know. Not many people would keep him, right? At least, not people on the move, like you." Her eyes, Bowes noted, were huge. Huge and dark and deep, and woman as all hell. It scared him some.

"He can work," Bowes muttered, scrubbing his heel in the mud. "He's like that horse I got. Dumb as a piece of wood, but he does what I tell him to. Doesn't bother me none, having him along..." He broke off, embarrassed. "I've got to sleep," he announced. "You too, girl. We'll reach a town tomorrow. I've got to be ready to play—and you too, Jonas!" he finished loudly, and Jonas started. Jonas had been asleep already, though still sitting up. "You'll be staying there, girl, when I leave." Bowes couldn't think of anything else to say, so he rolled himself into his blankets, stared up at the few stars that he

could see overhead.

"Patience." It sounded like a prayer, coming out of the dark. "My name is Patience."

"So was mine, girl, once," Bowes replied, his eyelids already feeling heavy. "But not anymore. Now stop talking and let me rest."

Bowes remembered this town. Remembered some of the ramshackle huts that lined the dirty brown river. He even thought he recognized a face or two, as he looked around from his perch on the wagon. He nodded here and there, tipped his beat up hat at one or two of the onlookers. It never hurt to look like you might belong, he thought. The towns could be worse than the open road, if you were unlucky.

He pulled the wagon to the center of the village and stopped before a decaying structure. This, Bowes thought, I remember. He pictured Bunny Penfield, and her magnificent breasts, as he headed for the door. An old man with a beard reaching halfway down his bare, sunken chest, answered Bowes' knock, and the two of them stared at one another for a long moment. "I'm the music man," Bowes said finally, impatient to get a look at Bunny Penfield. It annoyed him more than a little, not being recognized—usually folks remembered him for years after he passed through. But this man was old, and if his memory was going, well...

There was still the aged television set he kept on his kitchen table. Pray to God he still has it, Bowes thought as he pressed his way inside the

dwelling.

"I remember," the old man said, with a voice like a reed flute. "You can't sing worth shit."

Bowes looked up, moderately annoyed now. "That's not me," he replied, keeping his voice level. "I'm a damn fine singer, best one on the road, in fact. I've had a meal here before, and I'll have one here again..." He broke off. The old man was shaking his head grandly.

"Best singer on the road my ass. That's cause no one can sing anymore—no one on the road, and no one anywhere, and sure as hell not you, Telemund Bowes."

So, he did remember.

"There hasn't been music since before the bombs," the old man went on. "And damned little of it even then. Music—real music—is rare. More rare than clean water, or a hundred miles of green grass. Noise, now... Noise is cheap. I've got a dog that can wake the whole village two hours past midnight every night. Could you do that, Bowes?"

Probably could, Bowes admitted silently. Out loud, he said, "You had a TV, last time. Something that the Iscariot missiles didn't fuck over. Now that's rare. It around?" Almost desperate with the need to stare at the little screen, he forced his way deeper into the house, cursing when his legs became entangled in the mounds of clothing and tools and picked-over animal bones that the old man kept cluttered on the floor. Filthy old bastard, Bowes thought, grinning through gritted teeth. He didn't deserve a real house like this.

And there it was. The holiest of artifacts. Bowes had seen perhaps five others in his lifetime. If I could make it work, he thought, I'd take it.

A bony arm reached over his shoulder and flicked a knob. Gradually, the screen came to life.

"They have music on this thing, too," the old man commented. "But it's crap. Music is gone from the world, Bowes—music is dead. Which is why you're still on the road, eh? You're still looking for it, somewhere out there." He cackled obscenely. "You pathetic fuck. In the old days, we'd have shot someone like you."

Bowes nodded. Go ahead and shoot me, you prick, he thought. Just let me watch this screen before I die. Let me stare, in bliss, at Bunny Penfield before I wink out and my song ends. He scratched his groin.

Two people were talking in a room the likes of which Bowes had never seen in his travels. He listened to their conversation, fascinated. "Where are they, I wonder?" he mused out loud.

"Somewhere the bombs didn't touch down, maybe," came the reply. "Maybe in the sky. That's where this comes from, you know. The signals all come from the sky."

"Like God," Bowes muttered. He knew all about God. "That looks like Heaven, too. I wonder if those two have to wipe their asses, up in Heaven?"

"I doubt it," the old man replied dryly. "Christ, just look at them. Their parents tucked them away somewhere safe, a long time ago. They're

probably on the moon. Hell, they look like they could live forever. They'll be as old as me, someday."

Bowes raised an eyebrow but didn't comment. "What about Bunny Penfield?" he asked. These two were something, and he wanted to hear them talk, but they had nothing on Bunny.

"Bunny Penfield? Where have you been, Bowes? I thought everyone knew..." He rolled his eyes. "Bunny wasn't real. Someone proved it, right on here." He tapped the screen. "They made her up, so people like you would have someone to stare at, and take to bed at night—if you know what I mean. Christ, nothing on this screen is real, for all I know. Course, maybe from in there, we're not real either, hey Bowes?"

But Bowes couldn't respond. He had lost the ability to speak. All he could do was sit there and remember. He could imagine.

Not real.

"Does it matter?" the old man asked, sympathetically. "Hell, it's not like she was any more real before. You never saw her, except on here. She was meant to be carried around inside your brain. And you've done it, Bowes, haven't you?"

"Jesus," Bowes mumbled, cradling his head in his hands. "Jesus Jesus Jesus. Talk about pathetic."

He could shake it off. He would shake it off, he decided. In fact, he was almost over it when he heard a sound from outside. A muddle of notes, all mashed together wrong, followed by laughter. Someone had his guitar.

Enraged, he rushed for the door. He'd kill the fuckers, he vowed. No one touched his guitar. Absolutely no one. It was already missing a string. If they broke another one, he'd...

It was Patience, sitting there in the wagon seat, a crowd of more than a dozen already gathered around her. She thumped the strings again as he watched, producing another discordant blur of raw sound. More laughter from the crowd.

"Christ, she's almost as good as you are." Bowes hadn't heard the old man step up beside him. "See what I mean, Bowes? Noise. It's everywhere. Everything is just a fucking bunch of noise. Even after we die, our ears still ring with it. Like that grey mess you get on the TV half the time—now that's lonely, that's the blues."

"Patience!" Bowes called. He wasn't about to kick her ass, not with all these people looking on. He might never get near the TV screen again. "Put it down, woman. It's a delicate instrument, and you don't know what you're doing. Dammit, just put it down." He was breathing heavily, watching her delicate, dirty hands cradling the instrument that put food in his stomach at least half the nights of the year. It had been waterlogged, dropped from the wagon, stepped on by Jonas, even used as a weapon more than once, but right now he could almost taste the loss of it. His chest ached as he took a slow step forward.

Jonas appeared with his drum and, grinning, began to bang out a rhythm. He didn't know. He was

blind to the tableau laid out in front of him, the tension of it. And, Bowes realized with some small degree of hurt, Jonas didn't really care who was playing along with him. He simply lived to bang his drum, to eat and sleep and pound the drum again the next day. For him there was nothing more. I gave him that drum, Bowes thought wildly. The son of a bitch. He doesn't even care...

Patience, her face a blank, slowly set down the guitar. Their eyes met, and Bowes managed a nod while the crowd groaned. Jonas continued to plunk out his beat; he was still grinning at Patience, still hoping for a partner.

The crowd yammered at Bowes as he pushed his way along toward the wagon.

"I'll play the fucking thing," he grunted as someone shoved him forward. He had no bloody choice, now. They'd rip his balls off if he didn't give them something. He glared at Patience, then grabbed up the guitar. He pretended to tune it. One of the tuning pegs cracked loudly and Bowes let up, his heart hammering. He banged out a chord, his tongue sticking out the edge of his mouth with the strain of testing the sound.

Close enough, he thought.

In front of him, the crowd slid apart, let the old man who owned the TV set come to the front. The beard waggled as he nodded at Bowes, then sat cross-legged on the ground. For some reason, the sight of him there made Bowes nervous, made his lips go just a little dry.

He's heard real music before, Bowes thought, glancing at the old man. He knows what it's supposed to sound like. Real music, Bowes was sure, did not come from a shitty, battered, five-string guitar with a wavy fretboard. He tried a chord. Christ, he thought, why doesn't it ever sound right?

"Here's a song someone taught me once," Bowes began solemnly. Who really gave a shit if the guitar was in tune, anyway? Who would know? And to hell with the old man.

He began to strum a rhythm with his right hand, slowly, then tap-tap-tap, his first fingernail jangling the strings. Then he threw in some moves with his right hand—to impress these bumpkins. His fingers plucked the high strings, then strummed again, a few more plucks, then some fancy shit with the left hand, ending with a slide halfway up the neck. Bowes was gone, now. His head was bent over the guitar, his eyes were closed. He was alone. Alone on the road.

He began to sing.

Now, no one had ever said that Telemund Bowes had a good voice, but it wasn't chickenshit, either. It could do the job. He sang the lines he remembered—he never really had learned the words to this one; the guy who wrote it had died too soon for that. And when Bowes ran out of words, he made up his own. He sang about riding down the road at noon, about stopping to drink out of a stream, about sleeping out in the rain, he sang about singing. Vaguely, he was aware of Jonas, and the almost shy beat of the drum that followed

the music. He can play, Bowes thought. Hell, I can play. Caught up in the song, he believed it, and it fired him with courage. He sang louder, then a little louder than that, until he was letting go at the top of his lungs. He began a verse about Bunny Penfield, and how she'd broken his heart—the crowds always seemed to go for that sort of story. But then he remembered that she wasn't real, and he stumbled, lost his train of thought, and for a moment he was just a man sitting on a wagon, bashing his guitar in front of a lot of people.

It was then that Patience started to sing. She didn't sing like Bowes. Her voice was not rough and uneven, it wasn't loud. In fact, he wasn't sure what it was. It sounded like wind, sighing in the trees, a whisper in his ear at night that sent shivers down his back. It's like water, he thought, closing his eyes again—water in a stream, gurgling in the dark, singing to the stars. The first bird in the morning. He heard other things, things he recognized, from the road. Listening to her, Bowes felt himself drift. His face was nearly touching the strings now, and his legs were numb—but he wasn't there to know it.

Music. The thought came to him from across a chasm. This is real music. He'd found it, finally. He'd heard it. Now Telemund Bowes was someone. A tear slipped from his eye, tracked along his face, and finally dropped ponderously to the ground. He thought he heard it strike the earth. He wasn't playing, he realized. Patience wasn't singing, there was not a sound in the entire world.

The crowd was still there, he found when he pried his eyes open. Every one of them, in fact more than had been there the last time he'd looked. But they didn't speak, didn't applaud or dance, or call for more.

They just stood there.

"That," someone said, in a dried, ancient voice, "was fucking music."

Bowes pulled himself up straight, his back protesting the move. How long had he been sitting there like that, he wondered. Hours, maybe. He looked at the old man, saw the empty expression, the distance in the man's face. He'd been somewhere else, too. He might have traveled decades during that one song. Jonas plunked out a single beat on his drum; Bowes heard him sigh. And Patience...

She just sat there. To her, it was nothing. Her eyes wandered over the crowd, taking in the rapturous faces. Then she looked at Bowes, and smiled. She knew what she could do. Maybe that was why she'd been out on the road herself. He realized he'd never asked her.

Bowes found himself grinning back at her as he set the guitar down inside the wagon. The instrument was safe—no one would touch it now.

"I'm hungry," he said, offering Patience his hand as he hopped down from the wagon that was his home. He'd get a meal out of this, he thought as he helped her down. Hell, he'd get a hundred meals out of it. He could come back anytime, now.

He just had to bring the music.

They rode out of the town the next day at noon. A handful of people stood along the road and watched them go. Some waved, but no one spoke.

A dry wind blew up from the east, carrying the smell of dirt and dust with it, kicking up swirls and little wind-devils around the horse's feet. Bowes sat at the driver's seat, whistling a mindless tune; the sun warmed his face as they traveled. From the back of the wagon came the

occasional thunk as Jonas plied his drum. Bowes could hear Patience's voice, as she talked to Jonas. Bowes smiled. He hadn't even made a show of trying to leave her behind today. In fact, he didn't intend to ever leave her behind.

They were headed west, this time. Maybe as far as the mountains, if the weather held that long. Bowes spat on the road, just out of habit, and at the top of his lungs, he began to roar out a song. 🍁

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: MICHAEL VANCE lives in Aurora, Ontario, and has previously published stories in *Tesseract's*⁶ and *The Inflated Graveworm*.

ABOUT THE ARTIST: RONN SUTTON has been busy for the better part of a year drawing the *Elvira, Mistress of the Dark* comic book for Claypool Comics. If the current issue on the stands is not by him, then the last one was, or the next one will be. He resides in Ottawa, Ontario with writer/artist Janet L. Hetherington. Despite having illustrated hundreds of posters a decade ago for various venues, performers and promoters, Ronn currently listens to very little music. His headphones are attuned to CBC-FM's news and information programming all day long as he draws. It all goes in one ear and out the other; he never hears a word of it. His favorite singer, however, is the late Tiny Tim (Herbert Khaury).

ABOUT OUR COVER ARTIST:

Illustrator MARTIN SPRINGETT was born in London, England, and came to Canada in 1965. He works from his home studio as a commercial artist and book illustrator.

Martin was the creator of the original covers for Guy Kay's classic fantasy trilogy, *The Fionavar Tapestry*, comprising of *The Summer Tree*, *The Wandering Fire*, and *The Darkest Road*. These novels, along with Springett's covers, were published worldwide. Many fantasy book covers were created in the years subsequent to *Fionavar*, but since 1990 Martin has concentrated on illustrating children's books. *Who*, published in 1994 was nominated for the Governor General's award. Other titles include *Mei Ming and the Dragon's Daughter*, *The Wise Old Woman* and *Too Many Suns*.

An accomplished songwriter and musician, Martin lives in Toronto with his wife and two daughters.

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Suggested Listening:

"Dream of the Archer" by Heart on Little Queen.

I love these women 'cos they kick ass with mighty fine boots.

Bouquet

by Bonnie Blake

illustrated by Peter MacDougall

I want to talk about my soul, Peter. But, to do that, I have to tell you what really happened. Judge for yourself whether I'm a traitor.

Assume this room is bugged. They still don't believe I've told them everything. I'm not sure if they let you come because you're my brother and this is my last day, or because you're a priest and I might confess I've given away federal secrets. The guard said you've been trying to see me for months. I'm sure they've sworn you to confidentiality, which you will follow.

The faithful Father Baxter. Always true to the system. I prefer to be true to humanity. Humanity. Perhaps that's not the right word.

Here, have a cup of tea, Peter, and a biscuit. Get comfortable. Civilized, isn't it, even without bone china? They tend to loosen up on a last breakfast. You being a holy man doesn't hurt either, I bet. Try this jam. Bookerman's mom sent it. It's out of this world. It's a bit seedy, but nourishing. We both need our strength, at least for the next twenty-four hours.

I know you've heard a hundred variations of the incident. Well, this is mine. We were flying south out of Goose Bay. One minute I'm navigating the *Vulcan*, and the next I'm sitting on a soft, green floor. I didn't feel the leaving. I was there, then I was somewhere else. There was Bookerman, Fellini, and me, your "out to make a mark" little sister. Our weapons were gone. You've seen our pictures a dozen times in the news, but if you'd seen our faces then...

Fellini freaked. Started screaming about how the air force had no fucking right to test new weapons on us without our permission. For a paranoid, he could sure

be naive. Bookerman, quiet as usual, inspected the walls and floor. He was our squadron genius with security systems.

Fellini finally stopped spitting threats and made a drawn out promise to smash a few heads when he got back. Bookerman explored every nook and cranny three times over, but it didn't look hopeful. The room was basically a box, no windows, a virtually seamless door without a handle, tiny holes in the ceiling for ventilation.

The aliens brought food and water on reed-like trays in wooden containers. They wore long gowns, like monks. Dwarfish body type. Faces hidden by large loose hoods. Fellini told us not to eat. Three aliens, three trays, three of us. Bookerman tried to jump one, but was knocked off his feet by some invisible force. They put the trays on the floor and left.

Fellini thought they were government created mutants. Too much *X-Files*, I think. He started talking about collecting our urine.

I told him, "Not in this lifetime."

An hour later, the aliens returned. I'm the communications expert, so I centered out the smallest captor and gave it my most dazzling smile. No response. I stated my name, rank and serial number, then demanded to know why we were being held prisoner. The creature nodded towards the others. I heard a low hum. It turned back to me, picked a container of water from a tray and drank. The hood fell back and I almost croaked.

Tiny black eyes. Poreless, greenish skin with dark veins. No nose. Thin lips. The ear, one long crescent shape from temple to temple. It vibrated

slightly when the creature hummed. You think they're children of God, Peter? Hummers with satellite heads? Or, do we "have dominion" over them too?

I took the container and, against Fellini's curses, drank the water to the bottom. It was pure and cool. I would have preferred wine. I picked up the bread.

"Put that down, Baxter," Fellini snapped.

I told him to go drink his piss and took a large bite. At other times, we ate strange vegetables and grains, but nothing resembling meat.

I christened the smallest one Skywalker. I kept waiting for Darth Vader to walk in. After thirty viewings of the Jedi trilogy, I thought anything was possible.

Remember when Father Charles told us marriage was like a tricycle? The man was the large wheel and the woman and children were the small wheels. I thought, screw that. I'm never getting married. I don't want to be a little back wheel forever. Man, I thought I could fly away from all the stupid, tight, trapped little wheels. Someday the air force would let women be fighter pilots. I'd be a twenty-first century Leia, unstoppable. At no man's mercy. Who needs wheels when you could have wings?

Finish your biscuit.

I tried languages, gestures, even Morse Code. Who knew how long they'd been hovering around earth? Then I attempted binary code, using my pointer fingers. Nothing. Finally I sang the scale. They were mesmerized, hummed each note back to me, then rushed out of the room. They

returned shortly.

"Yes, we come in peace," said the machine in Skywalker's hand. It was a mixture of our own voices, as if they'd been taped, spliced, and played back. They couldn't form words.

They called me a "chanter," didn't understand the word "prisoner." They'd taken us out of the *Vulcan* because we seemed most likely to be comfortable on their ship and we might have common experiences which would make communications easier.

I explained a few basic needs, comfort, hygiene, personal privacy. They accommodated as best they could. I felt so powerful. The mouth-piece of the world. First contact. Then, like a D-grade movie, reality gave an odd twist.

Roswell, New Mexico, the stuff of pocketbooks, came up. The Hummers wanted information about an aircraft downed in 1947. They had taken all this time to trace it and then prepare for contact.

"The Americans'll never give them back the aircraft," said Fellini.

"Keep aircraft," said Skywalker's machine. "Want beings."

"They just want their people back," whispered Bookerman.

Fellini thought the word people didn't apply. I looked at Skywalker. He formed a small smile.

I tried to explain that it was a different government, that we were expendable captains, that our chances were nil.

Skywalker hummed.

"What if Washington says no?" I asked.

"We will be not glad."

"You will not hurt us? Cause us

pain?"

"Is food not good?"

"I mean, if the Americans will not give you back your people, will you kill us?"

More humming. I don't think they understood the question.

I sent the message to Ottawa. Washington denied all knowledge of a downed alien craft and ordered them to depart or else. I thought that was bloody pompous, over Canadian airspace. Skywalker was confused. I explained that they were a threat to earth.

"Threat like 'smash a few heads'?"

I snorted and looked at Fellini.

"No. Not true. Unreal. Never. Negative. No threat. No harm. No weapons. Not in this lifetime."

I laughed. Fellini asked about the force field.

"The shell is to protect from harm," they explained. "We did not anticipate deliberate attempt to injure. It is unknown to us."

They took me to a separate part of the ship, to explain their systems. It was so far beyond me. I had no context. They insisted the only defense they had was a repelling shell around the ship to prevent damage. Nothing offensive. I couldn't honestly tell if it was true, so I didn't pass that on to Ottawa. One more nail in my coffin.

The men gave the other two names: Doc and Bashful. Maybe we had slipped into a fairy tale. I sent a flurry of messages to Ottawa.

"We have patience," explained Skywalker. "They will understand if we find the right words."

Each alien now had a communicator and Bookerman was deep in discussion with Doc. He was fascinated

by the Hummer's music. Fellini told him repeatedly to shut up and not give information to the enemy.

Doc solved that. He showed us the audio and visual tapes they were making of radio and television broadcasts. "If we want information, it is already available," he explained.

Here, Peter, finish up the last of this jam. I've eaten all I can and I'll be damned if I'll let the guards have it.

Inevitably, the topic of the dead aliens in Roswell arose. Why did they want them back so badly?

"Life is death is life is death," said Doc. "To know and believe is to be truly alive for eternity."

I thought about you, my brother, the priest. Wouldn't you love to sink your teeth into a metaphysical discussion with an alien who'd never seen a Bible? You think the Hummers crucified a Christ? They have ... had no concept of execution.

"But we must bring our people home," Skywalker said. "They have been removed from the choir. There is a void in our existence. We did not anticipate this risk when they volunteered to explore outside the choir."

"Yes," said Doc, "it was a mistake. Our planet hopes to regain the loss. Then there will be no more of such travel. If others choose to come to us, they will be welcome."

We exchanged glances.

"So what happens when you get the bodies back?" said Fellini.

The aliens joined hands and a glow traveled through their arms. Skywalker explained.

On their planet, their dead are immersed in tanks of fertilizer until decomposed. Experimental seeds from

crossbred plants are then sown in this soil. The dominant vegetation is then cultivated and nurtured until the soil is exhausted and several plants are brought to seed.

The spent soil is scattered in the wild. The seeds are packaged, labeled with the dead person's identity and given out. Hummers plant these in their personal gardens. Some go to seed for the next season. This is germinating.

Each person has a collection of seeds which they pass down through generations. They believe an energy, even a type of consciousness continues. Central garden banks keep the seeds preserved for posterity in case of loss. "Living seeds" are stored and catalogued all over the planet.

The dead explorers locked away in Roswell had no living seeds. Doc was concerned that their tissues may have been damaged or destroyed. What would their community do? The plants grown from living seeds are believed to influence other species around them. Plants from beings of such courage, intelligence, and sacrifice would surely be beneficial to all. The demand for their living seeds would be phenomenal. How could Skywalker and the others return home empty-handed? Not only did the living cry out for their return, but the dead, trapped in limbo, were unable to germinate. How could the cycle be left broken?

I asked them what happens if a Hummer burns to death. It didn't matter. The ashes were germinated. Pretty flexible, don't you think?

Skywalker started asking me personal questions. He wanted to know the difference between me and the

others. I explained that I was a woman, the sex that bore children. I asked if he was male or female; after all, the robes were fairly concealing.

"I am, we are all, both."

"No kidding. Can you have children?"

"No. We must have aliens." Skywalker smiled.

They may not have ribs, but they've got a funny bone.

I never would have had kids, not the marrying kind. I've had sex, absolve me if it'll make you feel better. It didn't feel like a sin. It felt like a waste of time.

You know, my first sexual encounter, I was twelve. Not what you think. Remember how I used to babysit at Johnston's? The road home was pretty dark. No one ever thought about danger, except Dad told me to watch for bears. Wrong kind of animal. No. I wasn't raped. Just three stupid boys hiding in the bush, playing sick games. They knocked me down. One of them shoved his hand under my pop top and squeezed my breast.

"Damn," he laughed. "They are real."

I pushed him off and ran, faster than I've ever run before. I fell on the gravel and tore a huge hole in my brand new jeans. They were brushed denim, pale blue bellbottom hip-huggers. I'd bought them myself with babysitting money because Dad said they were trash. The boys chased me all the way home. Dad was out. I braced a kitchen chair under the door because we didn't have locks then, remember? They ran around and banged on the windows a few times, then left. I threw the jeans out. I never told Dad. I remembered how he'd said girls who dress to draw

attention to themselves shouldn't be surprised when they get in trouble. I still have the scar on my knee.

A couple of the officers on base have tried similar things, but they found out a second-Dan black belt is no pushover.

Communications with Ottawa dragged. Fellini got a little stir crazy. He seemed to resent the relationships Bookerman and I had made with the Hummers. He finally lost it and took a swing at Bookerman, who responded in kind. Just then, the Hummers came in. They circled the two fools rolling on the floor and started chanting, "Alarm. Alarm. Alarm." It was enough to unnerve the men; they pulled apart and stared at our keepers.

The Hummers were shocked that the men had deliberately harmed each other. The men started arguing and shouting again. When they jumped to their feet, the aliens formed a barrier between them.

Skywalker wondered if their food had caused an illness. I explained about captivity and what it does to a person. About homesickness. This they understood.

Skywalker was ashamed and promised our immediate return. Fellini whooped for joy. Everyone shook hands and expressed no hard feelings. Skywalker had a last message for our people.

"Through television," said Skywalker, "we finally understand 'kill.' Is that why your people will not return our explorers? What has happened, has happened. Please, explain our need and our acceptance of the past. We will wait for the bodies. Otherwise, the choir will be unbalanced forever."

Bookerman met my eyes and frowned. I asked the Hummers to send Fellini on ahead.

I don't know if Skywalker would have agreed to give us the equipment if he'd understood the risk to Bookerman and me. Washington should be grateful. Fifty-year-old bodies for a new set of gadgets.

This cell is far smaller than the room on the spaceship. 'Course, there were three of us there. Here, I'm alone. But then, I've been alone for a long time. Forever. I know you tried to contact me since Dad's funeral. Did you know he had his first stroke while I was at church listening to the priest talk about loaves and fishes? "There were four thousand people there, not counting the women and children." I wanted to be counted.

You don't know how much Dad depended on me after you went to the ministry. When Mom died, he lost interest in church, in clubs, even in fishing. Nothing mattered. I'd ask him over and over what I could do to help. He'd just shrug.

I had to at least give him the burial he wanted. He said he'd felt so cold since Mom died. Just once, he wanted to be warm again. When that priest started going on about cremation flaunting God's laws... I know, I know, he was a dinosaur. It wasn't just that. It was a lot of things.

Even when I was a kid, I felt alone. Like everyone was in a play and I was the only one who knew it was just a script. I used to think if I left the church, I'd be terrified at death. Beg for a priest and Last Rites. So far, I feel mostly relief. You see, this chapter's over, and I don't have to be able to explain it after

all. There won't be a test.

I feel bad about Bookerman, though. I was the one to suggest it. I don't think he would have done it on his own, but he went along. We both knew Washington was never going to release the bodies. Bookerman got us past security on the way in, but he was killed on the way out. He had the oddest look, like he'd ordered steak and gotten hamburger. The Hummers were horrified. Skywalker never would have allowed us to steal the bodies if he'd known what could happen.

I guess you heard their last message. I showed them how to use the satellites so everyone would get it. "May your choir be symphonic." High hopes.

They didn't let me attend his funeral. I wanted to try out what the aliens do at their wakes. On little paper flowers, they write down any hard feelings or unresolved resentments they feel toward the dead. They mulch them in with the body while they chant, "Forgive. Accept. Understand." The pains are buried so that the joys can be remembered clearly. I didn't have much to bury about Bookerman though.

I have one last request, Peter. I've never asked for your forgiveness. I want you to pray for me now. *Come close. I want to whisper. Keep praying. Louder. So the guards can't hear me. I know you'd have given it easily. I'm asking for something harder. Your trust. Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been many a long year since my last confession.*

Skywalker learned about my arrest and tried to communicate with the MPs. His body shell didn't work in earth's gravity. Aliens don't handle bullets any better than humans.

Somehow, Doc and Bashful retrieved his body. I guess they're learning. They took Skywalker home immediately for germination.

I never expected to see any of them again. I don't know how Doc got past the sensors, the cameras, and the guards in a military prison. He seemed to know I wouldn't leave with him. I **am** a traitor and I accept my sentence.

He came last night. Even after what happened to Skywalker two years ago, he risked his life to bring me something. Left his beautiful planet, perhaps forever. Faced unimagined violence. Mind you, they were prepared this time.

Look in my hand. Recognize them. The same seeds that were in the jam. I mixed them in. Insurance. I couldn't

get them out, except through you. They'll search you. This was the only way. I'll swallow these, but I'm not sure if they'll survive the electric chair or the autopsy. You're my backup.

Doc says the shells are resilient. They have to be soaked before sowing. Yours **will** survive.

I want you to germinate my body. They'll expect you to claim it. Cremate me. Dig my ashes into a corner of your garden and add the seeds. Doc promised to come in two seasons for a packet. Be sure you have them ready. I explained how he could find you. Keep some or give him all of them; I don't much care. As long as I get to be part of the weave.

Skywalker, me, and millions of Hummers. Imagine the bouquet. ♣

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: BONNIE BLAKE teaches in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Her recent publications have been for children, but she's passionate for speculative writing in all its wild, weird, and wonderful forms. This is her second story for *On Spec* ("Mamasan," Summer 1994). She says: "If aliens ever contacted us, I believe we couldn't communicate. We've lived with intelligent, sentient beings, such as the elephant. It's only been since we've pushed them to the edge of extinction that we've learned that much of their vocal language is below our hearing range and we've seen the sophistication of some of their interactions. I wonder what else we've missed."

ABOUT THE ARTIST: PETER MacDOUGALL says that seeing as his illustration for "Bouquet" was done late at night, he wasn't listening to anything but his baby snoring. "But—" he claims "—if I was going to listen to something, I would have been listening to the soundtracks for *Blade Runner*, *The Saint*, and *The Fifth Element*." Among other things, Peter illustrates in natural and digital media, writes, and generally causes trouble. Visit his home page at:

<http://home.istar.ca/~pem/index.htm>.



Suggested Listening:

Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*: the "Largo," "Summer Allegro Non Molto," and the "Presto," and Beethoven's *Eroica*.

The Vivaldi Connection

Susan MacGregor

illustrated by James Beveridge

I don't know how long I'd been asleep before my subconscious registered the sound, a single sweet tone growing upon my awareness as softly and as gently as the rising sun. If the dawn had had a sound, then what I heard would have been appropriate, the voice of night lifting into rose, tangerine, and gold. A song of morning, of a new day, a new beginning. Whatever laboratory dreams I'd been dreaming, those images of plants and trays and soil samples vanished into the experience of that one clear note.

I awoke with a start, the bell note snuffed as the cushioned silence of the lab came filtering in. Before me sat tray lot 417 exactly where I'd set it the night before. I'd forgotten to cover it with its humidicap, having fallen asleep before doing so. The mignonette were ready to flower, all the mauve buds still closed, save one. Tentatively, I touched a finger to the tiny open hand. An echo of the dream song revisited me.

There was a sudden inrush on air, followed by the quiet *whoosh* of the lab door closing.

Rake, damn him. I glanced at my watch. It was 5:32 in the bloody morning.

He came in and went directly to his station, brushing aside a bougainvillea with a shoulder, not bothering to glance in my direction. Not that I wanted him to. The less notice he paid of me, the better.

I rubbed at the dirt smudging my cheek. My armpits were damp. I needed a

shower.

"Sleeping with the plants again?" Face carefully neutral, he was stuffing some papers into a briefcase.

Can't resist it, can you? "Just leave me alone," I said.

"Fine," he countered. "I was only attempting to make conversation."

"No, you weren't."

"Okay, so I wasn't. What do you want? To be left alone or to have a discussion?"

I glared back at him.

"I'll save you the choice," he said.

"The lab's all yours for next couple of days. I'm off to Saskatoon to present a paper."

"You came in at 5:30 in the morning to pick up your presentation?"

"Early flight."

"I'll bet. You're usually *much* better organized."

Understanding dawned on his face as he choked back a laugh. "You think I came in for the sole purpose of harassing *you*, Laura? Don't flatter yourself. You're the last person I'd be interested in. A woman who thinks her plants sing to her."

I felt the blood rush to my face.

"Look, I apologize. That was uncalled for. I'm leaving now."

"Just take out your frustrations on a lab tech, okay? I don't need them."

"Look, I'm sorry..." He stood there, briefcase in hand and regarded me. "Tell me one thing first, Laura," he said finally. "If you find sharing this space so intolerable, then why don't you just leave? Put in a request and fund your own lab."

"Already done. Two weeks ago."

That surprised him. The expression on his face was worth the admission.

Let him wonder how I managed it. I'd been told by Bill, the department chair, that they'd do what they could given the limited green space available, but Rake didn't need to know that. Picking up his laptop, he left without saying another word.

I should have felt relieved, but I didn't. It was an empty victory in an empty space. I turned my attention back to tray 417. Like clockwork, the blossoms usually opened to the morning light, but not even my companion of the morning, my lone mignonette, reached for the light, now. It had closed back into a tight green fist. No doubt the hostile environment, I thought. I blamed Rake for that.

I also blamed myself. I'd been as green as an undergrad, swayed into infatuation by the attentions of the star performer in the department. I'd also been without anyone for a very long time. One night away at the Symposium on Plant Biotechnology in Vancouver, a shared bottle of wine, and two overactive libidos was all it took. Sex with Rake had been wonderful. He'd been wonderful.

Unfortunately, the physical sharing led to something even more intimate. In the afterglow of lovemaking, I exposed my soul.

With our arms and legs still entwined, our lips only inches away from each others, I broached a subject that should have remained taboo. But I wanted to share my heart. I wanted him to know *me*.

"I want your thoughts on something," I began.

"Anything."

"You might find it a little strange..."

He cocked an eyebrow, "Now, this

sounds interesting." He kissed me on the neck.

"No really. It might seem an odd question, but I'd like to know what you think."

"Ask away."

"How do you define intelligence?"

That surprised him. He frowned slightly, then ran a finger down the length of my nose. "Knowing what's right."

That earned him a kiss.

"No, really," I pressed.

"Well," he considered. "I'd say it's the ability to pull different aspects of experience together and come to a new place. A new understanding."

"But even prior to that. What would the source be?"

"An ability to sense?"

"Then there's little difference between intelligence and instinct."

"What are you getting at?"

"You know I've been working with plant response to sound."

He nodded. Prior to our involvement, we'd been sharing lab space for some time. Luckily, our tastes in music ran the same gamut. He'd even brought in a few of his own classical CDs for me to use.

"What I haven't told you is that I believe they do more than grow better to certain types of music. I think they respond. Possibly even express themselves."

I know they react to different stimuli, even have some ability to communicate distress..."

"Rake, I'm not talking about chemical or electrical response. I'm talking about a level beyond that. I think they communicate sublinguistically. That they form thoughts and

express emotion."

"You think they talk?"

"Not talk, so much as sing."

He stared at me. "Sing."

"Yes."

"What are they singing?"

"I don't know. That's what I hope to find out."

"How?"

"I'm not sure. I've been mapping all the variables of growth, including the musical factors I introduce. If I filter every known variable out, then whatever shows up may be what I'm searching for. After that, anything goes. I guess I'd try to find sound matches..."

"How New Age."

"What?"

"New Age. Like that spiritualist guy who claims his jojoba plants can heal if you meditate beneath them. You think they might? I have this ingrown toenail that keeps acting up."

"Forget it. Just forget it." I grabbed my clothes from the floor, the desire and tenderness I'd felt turning to ice.

"Where are you going?"

"Back to my room."

"I was only kidding, Laura."

"Then kid someone else."

That was two months ago. Since then, we'd swung between clashing and ignoring each other. I'd found the best way to deal with Rake was to put him out of my mind and out of my life. Mostly, I managed. It was easier when he wasn't around.

I pulled a CD from its holder and slipped it into my machine. Vivaldi's "Largo" from *The Four Seasons* filled the lab. There was something about the violin strains in the first movement and the remembered melody from my dream that were similar. I set the soil

sensors to regulate root activity and the humidiprobes to record changes in turgor pressure. I intensified the overhead klies to approximate 7:00 in the morning. Kirilian holos would record any electromagnetic surges. If the plants were communicating, my computer would filter out their voices, over and above the other established variables.

Shower and Rake forgotten, I settled into my chair and waited for the symphony to begin.

Time stretched, and I watched the mignonette begin to open, tiny four-fingered hands reaching for the light. The peace of the lab settled upon me, and I felt as bright as the growing light, full of energy but at peace. How much time did anyone ever spend in such reflection? To sit in meditation where time lost its meaning? What would the world be like if everyone stopped whatever they were doing and just sat with a plant? A billion Buddhas sitting in zazen under a Bo tree? And perhaps finding enlightenment? The sweet poignancy of the "Largo" turned into the gripping immediacy of the "Summer Allegro Non Molto," and I was swept away with it.

My vision tunneled into a small slender stock lifting its leaves to the light. I saw only mauve and green and felt my consciousness dwindle to a point. The temptation was there to check the monitor, but I didn't. Let the machine catch what was happening in the outside world. My journey was on a different path.

The world began to unfurl at an amazing rate, leaves opening like banners of green fire, stalks rising to pierce the sky. The scent of life rose in my

nostrils, its taste rich upon my tongue. Through damp loam, roots were creeping, the surge of life drawn up and extending to the tips of my fingers like leaves upon the breeze.

I felt trapped and free in the same moment. Tied to the earth but liberated, my consciousness raced ahead with every shoot that caught, every seed that sailed through the blue firmament, spiraled up upon banks of warm air. All growth was a hymn. To exist was to sing. To be was both a miracle and a blessing. Life was but a reflection of that first note, that first song. A melody that reached beyond blue. That dwelt before green.

I came from that place feeling such peace, such joy. My face was wet. I didn't recall when I'd started crying.

Appropriately, the "Presto" was playing, the violins as urgent and unrelenting as a summer storm. All the flowerets had opened. Collectively, they stood like a small green choir, cloaked in lavender and jade. I swiped at my eyes and pulled myself together, thankful that Rake was nowhere nearby to see.

I glanced over at my monitor. Something was happening.

Static. Lines of static scrolling across the screen in waves of dark sound, black scratchings like those made by twigs on wet clay. This was something new. Beyond the variables of growth, beyond the Vivaldi. And then a flatline, as if the sound had abruptly stopped.

I caught my breath, my heart pounding. The *song*. The machine had captured the mignonette's song.

My fingers clumsy, I typed the commands to save and print. One floor up, away from the damp warm climate of

the arboretum, a printer was spewing results.

Stiffly, I arose, my cramped muscles complaining. Time to collect the hard copy before any questions were asked. But not before I replaced the humidicap over my precious charges, my divas.

"Thank you," I whispered to them.

Four days later, I entered the lab to find Rake standing at my monitor, fingering a copy of the printout. I'd only been away from the lab for five minutes to get a cup of coffee.

"What's this?" He was more puzzled than confrontational.

"That's none of your business." Jamming my coffee down, I tore it from his grasp.

"It looks like some kind of frequency wave."

"Get out."

"Get out of my own lab?"

"Get out of my work area!"

"I thought you were getting your own work area."

"Not soon enough, it seems."

"Laura, this is stupid. About Vancouver. I'm sorry I joked about your project."

"Fine. Now if you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

"I just apologized. Didn't you hear me?"

"I heard you."

"Then what is this?" he exploded. "Is this some kind of 'fuck off, Rake'? Sleep with me, and then just fuck off? Is this a game you play?"

"I don't want this discussion..."

"Then the sooner you're gone from here, the better."

"Fine with me."

He brushed past, his face tight with anger. Then he turned abruptly. "I think I know what the hell that is!" He jabbed a finger at the printout.

"You figure you've got some kind of a message from those stinking plants! A recording of some kind! So what do they say? I'm dying to know!"

"You are so far from the truth, you have no idea."

"Truth, huh? Since when do you decide what I know and what I don't about truth? Seems to me you hide from it. Probably all you've got there is a recording of the ventilation system!"

"You ever wonder why you exist, Rake?" Somehow, I managed to keep my tone calm.

"What?"

"Why you exist? Do you ever wonder what you have in common with all of this?" I lifted a hand to indicate the lab, the university, the world beyond. Of course he didn't. He was all bottom line, all how much money he could pull in from the sponsors. His PhD involved improved grass seed, for heaven's sake.

"What are you getting at?"

"Never mind. It's all too New Age," I told him.

Something in his eyes went flat. "Then why ask, if you've already figured it out?" he demanded. He left without saying another word. Another small victory for me, but I didn't savor it.

I managed to record the plants a few more times over the next few weeks, always when Rake was not present and I was in the right frame of mind. Each time, I revisited that primordial garden of the mind and returned to it

brimming with a happiness so palpable I could taste. And each time, the frequencies on the computer also matched the initial printout to the last stroke. Whatever it was that the plants were communicating, they were repeating it endlessly, over and over again.

Intrigued, I ran numerous linguistic searches from as many databases as I could access, but with no success. The frequencies didn't match any human or animal patterns I found. I also traced what I could with musical maps and found the recording had some similarities to Vivaldi, which made a kind of sense, and to portions of Beethoven's *Eroica*. In spite of these small gains, I was still about as far away from deciphering as when I started. Unfortunately, the computer time was also drying up, like water from a clay pot.

"I know it sounds crazy," I told Lila my sister, as we shared a Saturday morning cup of tea together at our apartment. For once, we'd found some time to spend together. Usually, she was busy working on her Master's in neural imaging. "But whatever they're doing, it's the same thing every time. I wish I knew where to look." I stroked the velvety leaves of an African violet that was sitting between us on the kitchen table.

Lila stirred her tea, her expression thoughtful. "You've tried linguistics and music. And nothing, right?"

I nodded.

"Maybe you need to come at it from a different angle."

"Such as?"

"Well, it's only a thought. Maybe too much of a stretch..."

"I'll consider anything."

"Well, how about medicine? Neurology, to be exact. Brain waves."

I made a face. Lila saw a use for neurology in everything. "I suppose."

"Look, just listen. What were you feeling when you thought you might be connecting with the plants? When you thought they were singing?"

"Hard to describe. Happiness, definitely. Growth and joy. Maybe a joyful thanksgiving."

"Dr. Chun of Seoul National has done some interesting work in emotional mapping. He contributed to much of the early research. What he did was to pinpoint the dendrite clusters in the amygdala where each emotion has its base. He's collected hundreds of EEGs mapping alpha and beta waves that arise when certain sites are stimulated."

"In lay terms, please."

"If you want to see what rage or fear or happiness look like, he's got pictures. He's mapped some amazing subtleties, like regret, jealousy, and hope."

"You think there's a connection between what the plants are expressing and what I feel?"

"I don't know, Laura. You tell me."

I reached across the table and squeezed her hand. "Thanks, Lila."

"For what?"

"For not treating me like a flake."

There were similarities. Comparing Chun's findings to my own showed equivalent peaks and valleys between the "Joy" EEG and the plant song, but they were far from exact. Surprisingly, the brain map was the simpler of the two, about as similar as someone humming a tune to the same piece being

played by a symphony orchestra. What this said about human beings and plants as life forms, I wasn't sure. It was an interesting development, though.

At least I may have proof they feel,
I entered into my notes.

When I logged in the next morning, I glanced at the time of my last entry of the night before. It read: 3:02 AM.

3:02 in the morning? No. I'd been long asleep in my bed by then.

Rake. He'd been reading my findings.

As if on cue, he strode through the lab door, laptop in hand. His expression was strange, hard to read. Pity? Sympathy? "Laura," he began, as he came towards me.

He had hacked my work, violated my privacy. A black rage choked me.

"How dare you read my work! You had no right! I'm going straight to Bill to file a harassment suit."

He stopped mid-stride, his eyes turning brittle.

"What makes you think I'd waste my time on your little project?"

"Who else but you?"

To read what I'd written without the benefit of the experience... I found myself close to tears. On the surface my notes would seem hysterical and stupid. One by one, my theories came crashing down. I was right up there with the woman who claimed tomatoes screamed when cut. I had no proof that the plants sang, except for what happened in my head. The thin comparison between Chun's work and my own was weak. Maybe Rake was right. Maybe it was only the ventilation system. I'd been too proud to check.

But I wouldn't cry. Not in front of

him. Tears welled in spite of my resolve.

"Prove it."

"Prove...?" For one shocked moment I thought he'd read my thoughts.

"It could have been anyone. I'm not the only one who has access to this place."

He was lying. And I couldn't face him any more. I bolted for the door.

"Laura, don't leave." He lunged for my arm. "Not like this. I've something to show you. Where are you going?"

I wrenched my arm free.

Of course, I went home to the apartment. Humiliated and demoralized, I plotted out my resignation in my head; the harassment suit had only been a threat. Rake would see that I became the laughingstock of the department. It didn't matter that he'd hacked my files. Everyone would forget about that in the light of Laura Slesinger being the emotional basketcase who believed her plants sang to her. Next she'd claim they pulled up their roots and danced a Strauss waltz.

"You should be a poet," Lila told me once.

"Can't afford the life," I replied. Funny that I'd always thought of Rake as the financial mercenary.

Dear Bill, I wrote. I regret circumstances have made it such that I can no longer continue my employment with the faculty. I'm resigning for personal reasons which I'd rather not go into...

There was a knock at the door. Trepidation knifed through me.

"Who is it?" I stammered.

"Lila," came the muffled reply. "Let me in. I forgot my keys."

I swiped at the tears staining my face

and unbolted the lock.

"Thanks," she said, her face sympathetic as she stepped through the door. "Don't be mad, all right?"

"Why would I—" I stiffened. Rake was right behind her.

"Go away," I grated.

"Laura, if you'd just listen..."

"Lila, how could you do this? You know how things are between us."

"Sit down," she said, hustling me into the living room, "and listen. I know you're upset, but Rake's got something to say. Something you need to hear."

"He has nothing I need to hear."

"Just shut up, will you?"

I bristled, then collapsed into an easy chair. I couldn't fight them both. Lila stood guard at the door, as if expecting me to make a mad dash for freedom.

Rake sat down in the chair next to me.

"You were right. I hacked your work," he admitted.

I glared at him.

"And I thought it was pretty lame at first. But I kept reading because I couldn't believe what you were suggesting. Also, because I was still angry with the way you've been treating me over the past few months."

"The way I've been treating you? That's rich."

"Anyway, as I kept reading I came across your printouts again, along with your ideas and conclusions. I was ready to dismiss them out of hand, but I couldn't get rid of the idea that I'd seem similar static elsewhere."

A tendril of hope unfurled in my heart. I quashed it.

"It bothered me that I couldn't

remember where. So still ticked with you, I made myself at home. I sat down in your chair, put up my feet, regarded your plants and turned on the Vivaldi. I almost hoped you'd come in early and find me there. For once, you didn't. When you saw me this morning, I was coming back from the library."

"I would have thought you'd had enough of fiction by then."

He waved the comment aside.

"As I sat listening to your tape and studying your plants, the music lulled me. Slowly, my anger dissipated, and I think I drifted off. I got to thinking about Vancouver and how great it was before everything turned sour. Everything in the lab seemed to conspire for my benefit—the chair, the atmosphere in the lab, the music, the plants. I felt comforted. Stupid, I thought. Now I'm dreaming like Laura."

He held up a hand to keep me from making a protest.

"Let me finish. Please. Anyway, as I sat there, starting to feel better, I watched your mignonette. After a while, it seemed like the lab disappeared and there was nothing but me and them. It was very soothing, but also invigorating. I felt really alive and connected. That bothered me a bit, because I've always seen plants as little more than objects. I didn't want to consider the ramifications of what it meant if they weren't."

"I suppose I could have gone further with whatever it was I was feeling, but I didn't want to. So, I gave myself a mental slap and brought myself around. Your machine was busy recording some kind of static. Again, I had an uncanny feeling of déjà vu that

I'd seen a similar pattern before. I printed off a copy and then, on a hunch, I decided to pay the Mather library a visit."

"The physics library?"

He nodded. "I found something."

He drew two hard copies of print-out from his briefcase. "This one's from your data."

He handed me both sheets. "And this one's a photocopy taken from a book I found." They were nearly perfect duplicates, every peak and valley, every squiggle, every scratch, almost the same.

"What is this?"

"You tell me, Laura. You honestly think your plants sing?"

"Maybe singing isn't the right word," I said, fingering the two nearly identical pieces of paper, "but it seems similar. They're expressing something. Over and over again. It's emotional. I'm assuming that because of the complexity, they're also expressing thought. The closest connection I've been able to find is between this and Chun's mapping of the amygdala."

"The 'Joy' EEG. Lila explained it to me."

"An interesting similarity," Lila said.

Rake glanced from Lila to me, his expression sober. "Before I became an agronomist, I did my undergrad degree in Physics. Astrophysics, to be exact. I loved the stars. But I ended up switching disciplines because I didn't think the employment opportunities were as good for an astrophysicist as they were in another area. Still, I learned enough about the heavens to recognize a few things. And I recognized this. Finally, it dawned on me what I was looking at. I went to the Mather to make sure."

"Will you stop putting me off?" I insisted. "What is it my plants are doing?"

He folded his hands together and a funny expression settled upon his face. "I think you've stumbled onto something profound."

"What?"

"They're singing the beginning, Laura. Over and over again." He indicated the duplicate photocopy I was holding. "That's what this is. The static afterglow of the Big Bang."

Connections. Between Vivaldi and Beethoven. Between plant song and "joy" EEGs. Microcosm and macrocosm. All reflections of the same creative principle, the same dynamic source.

Although I didn't expect it, the news of what Rake started calling the Vivaldi Connection was met with heated opinions—everyone was divided, everyone had a bias. What I found surprising was the fact that no one seemed ambivalent. Funding began to pour in from unusual sources, and unique collaborations were established. New multidisciplinary departments were set up, the oddest one being between the university's faculties of Medicine and Arts (Music), and the Knox School of Theology.

I was given a new lab. A new office as well, right beside Bill's. Suddenly, I couldn't ask for enough. Everything I needed was found.

Save for one thing.

I hunted Rake down and caught him finally at one of his farm seed plots. He was crouched down beside a square of fescue. It was a beautiful fall day, sunny and warm.

"Hi."

He glanced up from his clipboard. I'd been trying to track him down for a while. He'd been hard to find. I wondered if he'd planned it that way.

"How are you?" he asked, his tone distant. He headed for a second plot and leaned down to study the seed.

"Fine. Busy. I'm off to Ottawa next week to present a paper."

"I heard."

"And you? How are you?"

"Good." He plucked a stalk of grass and rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger. "Busy."

"I have a favor to ask of you."

His head snapped up. He wasn't smiling.

"I want you to come to Ottawa with me," I pressed. "I think the co-contributor of my work should be there to help me present it."

His eyebrows rose. "You credited me?"

"It seemed only fair."

He stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Is that the only reason you want me to come?"

We stood staring at each other over the plot of green. The connection between us was as strong as ever. I wondered if he felt it as much as I did.

"No. It isn't."

"Then why?"

I didn't explain. I didn't think I had to. If he felt the same bond I did, he'd know.

We continued to regard each other. Finally, he smiled, his eyes growing warm. "Ottawa should be nice this time of year," he suggested.

"No matter what the weather," I agreed, matching his smile. 🍁

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: SUSAN MacGREGOR has several alter egos, one of the more colorful of whom, Scarlet, claims that Susan MacGregor does not exist. Scarlet wants everyone to know that she adores sambucca, the annual Copper Pig-Out every July at Clear Lake, and men with biblical names. Susan wants everyone to know that, despite what Scarlet says, Susan is still in charge. In everyday moments, Susan writes SF, publishes periodically, and co-edits *On Spec*.

ABOUT THE ARTIST: JAMES BEVERIDGE dwells in suburban Edmonton actively seeking the truth within the conundrum that is creativity, through activities both manual and silicon-based. He is currently expanding his website with unsolicited visions from R. Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series. He says that as far as music goes, he leans towards heavy alternative music such as Tool, Days of the New and the Tea Party. He also quite likes satirical melodic romps from the Refreshments to Frank Zappa. Visit his website for more insights into his mind: <http://www.darkcore.com/~sage>.

ON the edge

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk



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Cattle Rustlers from the Skies

Country Punk 1=72

Richard Stevenson
Music by David Merriman

Intro (Guitar) A7 A7 D7 A7

E7 D A7 A7 E7 Well we're

A7 D7 A7

cat-tle rust-les a-tors, new bod-y fab-ni-ca-tors, got hom-ini-cu-lous in-ten-tions and a whole mess of in-ven-tions. Goo-na

E7 D7 A7 Bmin7 Cdim7 E7

zoom down from the skies for some parts to hy-brid-ize; zap some loose cow chew-in' cud, jack'er up and drain'er blood

A7 D7 A7 D7 A7 D7 Ddim7 E7

Goo-na ex-cise a few or-gans, leave clean-er cuts than doctor Morgan's, leave that wide-eyed bovine corpse and vam-oose through spacetime warps

Chorus: A7 E7 A7 D7 D7/A D7 E7 E7/B E7 D7 E7

Yeah, we're a-li-en cat-tle rust-les, sas-sy high tech space ab-duc-tors; goo-na 'buse your dogs and hoo-sees, con-found all yo' po-hoe for ces

(Guitar, funky)

(spoken) We're intelligent and devious, presumptuous and ingenious.

(A la Barry White)

ain't no way to stop us - ain't shoot or stab or bop us

We're too advanced too catch Ain't no troops you can dispatch

to corral us cattle rustlers we're transient space hustlers

A7 D7 A7 D7 A7 D7 Ddim7 E7

(vocal line resumes)

Don't get your knuc-kers in a twist or pan-ic you know we ain't sa-tan-ic, we just need a hy-brid go-lem, a zoom-bie what you might call em.

A7 D7 E7

some ge-net-ic bod-y that breeds air aint so clod-dy, so we can col-on-ize your pla-net and hang with any Ken or Ja-net Yeah, we're

A7 E7 A7 D7 D7/A D7 E7 E7/B E7 D7 E7

a-li-en cat-tle rust-les, sas-sy high tech space ab-duc-tors, goo-na 'buse your dogs and hoo-sees, con-found all yo' po-hoe for ces

A7 (Guitar)

E7 D A7 A7 E7 A7

Cattle Rustlers from the Skies

Richard Stevenson
music by David Merriman

Well, we're cattle mutilators,
new body fabricators;
got homunculus intentions
and a whole mess of inventions.

Gonna zoom down from the skies
for some parts to hybridize;
zap some lone cow chewin' cud,
jack 'er up and drain 'er blood.

Gonna excise a few organs,
leave cleaner cuts than Dr. Morgan's;
leave that wide-eyed bovine corpse
and vamoose through space/time
warps.

Chorus:

Yeah, we're alien cattle rustlers,
nasty high tech space abductors;
gonna 'buse your dogs and horses,
confound all yo' po-lice forces.

We're intelligent and devious,
presumptuous and ingenious;
ain't no way to stop us—
can't shoot or stab or bop us.

We're too advanced to catch.
Ain't no troops you can dispatch
to corral us cattle rustlers:
we're transient space hustlers.

Don't get your knickers in a twist or
panic:
you know we ain't satanic;
we just need a hybrid golem,
a zombie whatyoumightcallem—

some genetic engineered body
that breathes air and ain't so cloddy,
so we can colonize your planet
and hang with any Ken or Janet.

Repeat Chorus:

Yeah, we're alien cattle rustlers,
nasty high tech space abductors;
gonna 'buse your dogs and horses,
confound all yo' po-lice forces. 🍁

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: RICHARD STEVENSON has published nine books of poetry to date. His 1993 collection *From the Mouths of Angels* won the 1994 Stephan G. Stephansson Award in the Writers Guild of Alberta's Best Book of Poetry category. Previous books of poetry include *Why Were All the Werewolves Men?* (Thistledown, 1994) and *Wiser Pills* (HMS Press Electronic Books, 1995). Forthcoming books include *A Murder of Crows* (Black Moss Press), and *Nothing Definite Yeti*, the sequel to *Why Were All the Werewolves Men?* (Ekstasis Editions). "My interest in monsters comes naturally to me," Richard says, "having grown up next door to a beatnik neighbor who always gave the neighborhood kids the blow-by-blow of the Friday Night Creature Feature each Saturday morning." The song/poem "Cattle Rustlers from the Skies" will appear in *Nothing Definite Yeti*. A suite of seven poems from Richard's 1990 collection *Whatever it is Plants Dream...* were featured in the Spring 1990 issue of *On Spec*: "Bunny Ears," "Devil's Backbone," "Maiden-hair Fern," "Lipstick Plant," "Moneywort — Creeping Jenny," "Moth Orchid," and "Tiger's Jaws."

ABOUT THE MUSICIAN: DAVID MERRIMAN is a composition student at Grant MacEwan Community College in Edmonton. He has a performance diploma in music, specializing in guitar, with which he drives his family, roommates and animals to criminal insanity—plucking away constantly. Dave currently plays around Edmonton with another couple of musical delinquents in a funk/rock band, Cousin Henry. He's really cute and currently single.

ASK MR. SCIENCE!

Ms. CH of North Vancouver, BC, asks:

Q : Is it true that "...music hath charms to soothe the savage breast"?

A : While this statement is not generally true, there are some notable exceptions. Any music in which the bass line pulsates in approximate imitation of a beating human heart is likely to possess this remarkable property. As an experiment, Mr. Science suggests that you carry a tape player on your person at all times. On the next occasion in which you are about to be attacked by a savage breast, quickly put on a tape of *Oxygene* by Jean-Michel Jarre, and watch the immediate soothing effect this music has.

Mr. JM of Vancouver, BC, asks:

Q : How can one prevent contact lenses from fogging now that the cold, wet weather is here?

A : If, before inserting the lenses, one will first rub the entire front surface of both eyeballs with the cut end of a potato, fogging will be prevented. A further benefit of this method is that less oil will be required to fry the potato afterwards.

Mr VF of Vancouver, BC, asks:

Q : Why, when a lighted match is held above a smoking candle, does the flame flash down the trail of smoke and relight the candle?

A : When the universe was told, seventeen billion years ago, "Let There Be Light," no one ever said "Okay, That's Enough." As a result the universe has gone on, to this day, trying to produce light at every opportunity.

SPECIAL OFFER!

Get 3 free back issues of *On Spec* if Mr. Science answers your question! Send your questions to:

Ask Mr. Science!

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Box 4727,

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Suggested Listening:

"Hymns To The Silence," by Van Morrison from the album of the same name—for reassurance that the muses are alive and well.

Music Monkey

by David Chato

illustrated by James Beveridge

Manny Locks sat alone in a dark basement corner of the university's computer sciences building, pushing the second half of a cream-filled donut into his mouth. It was late and, except for a few diehard hackers and people sweeping the floors, the building was empty. He stared at the blinking cursor on the computer screen in front of him, trying his best to figure a way around the assignment due the next morning. Professor Keystone had given everybody three weeks to work on it. Manny had tried starting three days ago, then again three hours ago. It was now three minutes to midnight.

He took another donut from the box, this one a chocolate glaze with sprinkles of God-knows-what. It looked like a zero. It looked exactly like what Manny had ready to present for the early-morning seminar—a big fat nothing. He ate it in one go.

"Probability, probability," he mumbled to himself. "Problem." He looked up at the corkboard on the wall behind the computer screen. The assignment, written on a piece of paper, hung there as it had for the past three weeks:

Write a sample program showing that the probability of an event occurring is never zero. Do not use the Shakespearean Monkey Scribe example.

Keystone had used a popular story to make a point about the seemingly magical things probability says can be done. It had to do with monkeys and typewriters and time. Given enough of all three, probability claimed that the works of William Shakespeare would eventually be generated by the random typing of the monkeys. There were a limited number of keys to hit, a set vocabulary to be used, and Shakespeare was dead, leaving a finite number of plays and sonnets to work toward. Of course, for practical reasons, the exercise had never really been carried out. But Keystone had presented the story and run a program to show that the probability was, as predicted, not zero. In fact, given enough monkeys and typewriters and time, it was inevitable that all of Shakespeare's works would fall out of the exercise. Every other work of literature as well, for that matter.

Manny sat in front of the keyboard and scratched at himself. Three days without washing were giving him a hint. He shook a container of deodorant and gave a squirt to each pit. It hissed dry. He was running out of time, and he was coming up empty. The probability that he'd be in the position to deliver anything to the seminar group the next morning was slowly approaching zero.

"Damn monkeys," he said. "Simplify. The monkeys had the alphabet, twenty-six letters. Shakespeare used 19,322 words. What could I use? What could be randomly picked at to form a pattern?"

He punched the return key. Hit it mindlessly again. Return, return,

return. The cursor skipped down each time. A small digital clock in the corner of the screen ticked off the seconds to midnight then turned over to 00:00:01, 02, 03. A tinny, internal speaker pinged out the five note sequence from *Close Encounters*, some previous user's default preference for an hourly chime.

Manny unconsciously whistled the tune through his teeth then bit into another donut, cinnamon on vanilla cake this time. There were no sugar highs left for Manny anymore; he was way past that, practically sweating carbohydrates and coffee. He shifted in his chair and brushed away crumbs from the front of his grey XXL sweatshirt.

He whistled the tune again, then sat up and slapped himself in the head.

"Shit, man! That's it! The diatonic scale. Twelve notes, and vary the rhythms."

He began banging away at the computer keyboard, sending out softbots on the campus network to pick up and return subroutines from the Music department, the Maths, English, others, anything with music content. Manny wrote his own software only when necessary, preferring instead to steal, chop and stitch together what he needed. In fact his little softbot program was the only one he'd ever written totally on his own.

"Randomly order the notes, their beats, bar to bar." His sticky fingertips raced over the keys. "I'll put a monkey in the machine and let him play. Do it fast, Music Monkey."

His bloodshot eyes were glued

open, glazed-over with lack of sleep and poor nutrition. His thickened heart did its best to pump as he concentrated. He kept on typing, slicing and dicing computer code, writing new stuff when required.

He connected his cobbled-together program to the computer's MIDI interface, allowing himself to hear what the Monkey was about to unwittingly create. A purloined file with a digitized version of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony lay open on the screen. If Music Monkey's random generation of notes could match it, it'd be the perfect example for Keystone's seminar. Probability said it would happen; it was just a matter of time.

"Let's see how long it takes you to come up with the dead kraut's song, Music Monkey. Time equals t. You tell me what t is." He poised his finger above the return key, about to start the program. His free hand dove into the donut box.

"Empty?!" There was no coffee either. He swept his styrofoam cup and the empty box from the table onto a full garbage pail. They tumbled off, landing on the mess lying about him on the floor. Cockroaches and their cousins scattered from the pile.

"I need food. I need drink," Manny said robotically. "Time equals t, equals ... hours at least. Maybe less since central resources aren't used much this time of night. I'll be back in thirty minutes, Music Monkey. See how far you get." He hoisted his bulk from the chair and tapped the return key.

A shiver ran through Euterpe, the muse

of music, as she drew a breath to play a note from her flute. She missed it completely, letting loose a hollow squeak instead.

"Whatever is the matter, Euterpe?" the muse of tragedy asked. Melpomene was so predictable, always looking for something sad to discuss.

"I'm not sure. Something in the mortal world is about to be altered, upset somehow," Euterpe answered. She set the flute down.

"Can I help?"

"You? Help? I think not." Euterpe stood, teetering. She felt a bit dizzy. "I'm going to have to visit. Don't touch my things while I'm away, okay?"

"Just the violin, Euterpe, please?" Melpomene pleaded.

"Don't touch anything! Especially the violin. The last time you played my violin, the mortals were in a funk for almost three years. Just leave it alone."

"You've hurt my feelings," Melpomene said, looking down. "Thank you."

"You need help, sister."

"Yes, I know. It's sad isn't it? Not quite tragic, though."

Euterpe knew enough not to carry the conversation any further. She left on her journey to the mortal world.

A beep came from the computer. Program complete.

Manny had been anticipating hours for the program to match Beethoven's Fifth. It had taken five seconds.

"What the...?" he said, sitting back down.

The computer played the music, Beethoven first, then Music Monkey's

equivalent. They were identical: the same, note for note.

He set it up again, this time aiming for Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska*. It took slightly longer, seven seconds.

"Keystone is going to freak! A program that writes music's got to be worth an A. Got to be worth ... wait a second." Manny's eyes narrowed to slits above his piggish cheeks. He slowly ran a thumb behind his ear, drawing back greasy stands of overgrown hair. Deviant thoughts crossed his mind.

He scanned a softbot's catch from the psychology department's database, searching for anything close to what he needed—a human cognition program, preferably one with a music appreciation layer. He needed some digital ears to listen and pick melodies which rose above the garbage. A program named "audience.exe" looked promising. He copied it and made the necessary modifications.

"Yeah, yeah, Music Monkey. Write me a new song."

He hacked into a government database registering all existing copyrighted music and established a link for automatic searching. Checking his program's creations against the registry would exclude existing songs.

"Write me something that hasn't been done before. Let's see how long it takes." He finished tapping the keys, then hit return.

"Oh-oh," Euterpe said as she stumbled on the path joining her realm to the mortal world. She regained her balance then stood for a moment.

"Sister! You're looking a bit tense

today." Thalia, the muse of comedy, stepped from behind a pillar and put her arm around Euterpe's shoulders. "What's wrong? Disco making another comeback?"

"Don't blame me for disco. I had nothing to do with it," Euterpe replied. "There's a problem with the mortals. Something big; I'm feeling weak."

"Another Andrew Lloyd Webber musical, perhaps?" Thalia said.

"Not funny," Euterpe said and kept walking.

Music Monkey's first original song took zero point seven seconds to write.

"Register it," Manny ordered and entered the command. The song zipped back to be copyrighted.

He had the program duplicate itself to grow exponentially into thousands of copies. For each one he created a loop, letting it run over and over and over. The monkey became a big, fat, powerful gorilla. Manny liked the thought. He scratched himself and hooted simian sounds of delight. They had become the world's newest composing team, sitting together in a dark corner with computer cables warmly humming the new tunes.

In the first three hours they put out over 8 million new songs.

By noon the next day, Music Monkey had written every new song that could ever be.

And Manny Locks owned every one.

Euterpe stepped down lightly on the surface of the mortal world, feeling displaced and unneeded. "Too late,"

she said. "What now?"

Manny sat silently watching royalty numbers climb on a small computer set on one corner of his desk. It had been several months since he had swamped the recording industry to rule the world of music. Every time a note hit the air, he collected.

He noticed a small upward blip on the revenue curve.

"Stinson?" he yelled at a speaker box on his desk.

"Mr. Locks?" his personal assistant replied.

"Stinson, I've noticed a blip on the curve."

"Yes, Mr. Locks. The Ranchadero Tour is doing well. Mr. Webber's been very successful in staging the—"

He cut her off. "Send somebody out to make sure we're getting all our money, Stinson. I don't trust that guy. He's funny-looking."

"Yes, Mr. Locks. Oh, and Mr. Locks?"

"Yeah?"

"Mr. Jackson is complaining again. Says he doesn't feel quite right doing Ragtime-style music. Says he—"

"I really don't care, Stinson," Manny said loudly. "I make the decisions. I say he does Ragtime. If he doesn't like it, tough."

"Yes, Mr. Locks," Stinson said quietly.

"And Stinson?"

"Yes, Mr. Locks?"

"Send up some more food."

"Yes, Mr. Locks."

He took a day-old jelly donut from a silver tray and had a couple of hard bites before throwing it across the room.

Suddenly, a scraggly young woman appeared from nowhere and stepped over the half-eaten donut. She walked toward his desk, shaking back the hood of an old discarded parka, its zipper broken and hanging, insulation poking from holes. Her baggy pants were worn and frayed at the cuff.

"Who the hell are you? How'd you get in here?" Manny spat through a mouthful of raspberry filling.

"You! You are the one," she said, pointing an accusatory finger. "You left me nothing. For months I've been searching, trying to find someone to inspire. You've stolen it all."

Manny smiled nervously and pressed a silent alarm button on the edge of his desk. "You got a name?"

"I am the goddess Euterpe, the muse of music." She firmed up and stood proudly.

"Sure you are," he said, standing to lean forward and extend a hand. "Yeah, well, I'm Manny Locks, the 'man' of Manny."

She didn't move, except to curl her lips at his remark.

He sat back down.

"You a songwriter? I can usually tell by the clothes. Not much money in it nowadays, seeing as I own it all." He looked her up and down, wondering in the back of his mind where the hell his security people were.

"No," she said.

"You want a donut?" He pointed to the tray then looked with anticipation to the double doors of his office.

She shot back a stare. "No one is coming to help you, Manny. The alarm, the other people, they might as well be a million miles away. It's

just you and me, and it's time we had a little talk."

Her voice sang as she spoke. Manny felt a pull in the sound of her words, something in their beat. He wiped his arm across his mouth and looked intently at her.

"Do I know you?" he asked.

"No," she answered. "You most definitely do not know me. Those who know me are the artists, the creators of music. They root themselves in experience to grow and bring forth beauty. I inspire them when they seek my help."

"I see," Manny said slowly, uncaring. "I have to tell you, you don't look so inspirational at the moment. Fact is, lady ... you look like a bum!"

Her eyes narrowed. She extended a hand, palm upwards, fingers curled. The muscles in her forearm became taut, and her face screwed into a menacing expression. She squeezed, and Manny's heart skipped a beat.

"Who..." He began to shrink back, realizing that she was inside him somehow, gripping his heart in her hand.

She took a step closer, her gaze fixed. "You have made a mess in the mortal world, Manny, and together we're going to clean it up."

"Why should I?" he said nervously. He stared at her hand, feeling it impossibly inside of him.

"Together we ... are ... going ... to..." she said. With each stretched-out moment between her words, Manny's heartbeat slowed, until it stopped altogether.

He clutched his chest, the pain spiking as his heart muscles strained

to contract. He felt the blood leaving his face, his skin getting cold. His eyes fogged, unable to focus.

"Stop," he gasped, panting to breathe. "How ... did you..."

She relaxed her hand and released him.

"I am Euterpe, the muse of music," she said casually. She looked away and took a few measured steps. "I inspire people in song. And, in all of you, the rhythmic beat of your hearts belongs to me as well." She turned back toward him, glaring. "Even yours, Manny Locks. Your machine may have stolen music, but it does not control the human heart. Only I can do that."

He looked at her hands, flexing ominously at her sides. A few beads of cold sweat dripped from his chin.

"You're going to give it all back, Manny. You're going to free everyone to create by inspiration again. Make music human again."

"Huh, okay," he said. "How?"

"Your rights of ownership, give them all up." She pointed at the computer.

He quickly logged into the copyright registry and began deleting his entries.

"And you are going to kill the Music Monkey," she demanded. Her words pounded in his chest.

"Right, no problem. Kill the Music Monkey," Manny repeated nervously. He quickly bypassed the security on his computer and erased all copies of the Music Monkey program. In a final submissive act, he opened a shallow drawer on his desk and retrieved a silver disc containing the single, original copy. He looked

at his reflection in it before snapping it in two like some plastic communal wafer, offering one half to her.

She was gone.


He dropped the two half-moon pieces of the broken disc to the floor then looked around, swivelling his chair, seeing nothing but his own reflections in the mirrored walls of his office. He was alone again. He checked his pulse and took a deep breath.

Slowly he reached into the desk drawer, removed another silver disc,

slid it into his computer and pressed return.

Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, fumbled and dropped a small book from which she was reading aloud. She looked a bit pale.

"What is wrong, Calliope?" Melpomene asked, getting up from a nearby stone bench to come to her aid.

"Suddenly I feel empty. Some great, dark cloud is about to sweep over themortal world. It is as if there are no longer any words to " 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: "Music Monkey" is DAVID CHATO's second appearance in *On Spec* ("The PlayTime Case," Winter 1997) and his sixth short story sale. He has this to say about the story: "I began writing this story just before Deep Blue beat grandmaster Garry Kasparov at chess. During final rewrites, I read a news article about software that paints original art indistinguishable from human works. The night before the story was submitted, I saw a demonstration of a new CD-ROM that plays music spontaneously created in the style of the classical composers, including, of course, Beethoven! I can only imagine what the muses must be thinking."

ABOUT THE ARTIST: JAMES BEVERIDGE dwells in suburban Edmonton actively seeking the truth within the conundrum that is creativity, through activities both manual and silicon-based. He is currently exanding his website with unsolicited visions from R. Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series. He says that as far as music goes, he leans towards heavy alternative music such as Tool, Days of the New and the Tea Party. He also quite likes satirical melodic romps from the Refreshments to Frank Zappa. Visit his website for more insights into his mind: <http://www.darkcore.com/~sage>.



Suggested Listening:
"Every Breath You Take" by The Police,
or any good Steeleye Span album.

Raven Song

Marcie Lynn Tentchoff
illustrated by Andrea Baeza

It was dusk when she stumbled, weary and aching, up to the town. Her pale, ill-cut hair stuck to her neck, her forehead, glued in place as her sweat dried suddenly in the now-cool breeze. One of the straps on her pack had broken a few leagues back, so it dangled, half empty, over one shoulder, bumping against her hip. At her waist hung a small, sparsely-filled coin purse. Hidden beneath her clothing was another purse, quite full. A long, curved dagger was strapped by her side in a shiny, new-looking sheath. The hilt itself was more worn.

Behind her, a few paces back, strode the bard.

She was still unaccustomed to his presence. Always a few steps behind. Always well groomed, well dressed. Never tired. He spoke little, not quite what she'd expected of a bard, but at least he did his fair share of work when they paused to camp at night. He would gather wood, fetch water, start the fire, even cook if she made it clear that she was busy. Still, she could not call him a comfortable traveling companion. Nor did he ever sing, though he claimed to be an accomplished songsmith.

And, always, he watched her.

The town was larger than her home village. It was circled by a low wall, its sturdy iron gate closed against night entrants.

She sighed wearily and prepared to rattle the bars for a while, but suddenly a shadow moved beyond the gate.

"Travelers. You come late to our town. If you would enter, state your names and business."

"I'm Jastine of Calvin's Well, a village to the west of here."

The guard nodded to her. "I know of it."

She shifted the strap slightly on her sore shoulder and struggled to clear road dust from her dry throat. "As to my business ...well ... I'd like to stay the night at an inn if there's room. Maybe more than one night. It depends. Has Yandros the cloth merchant passed through town yet?"

The figure beyond the gate hawked and spat into the weeds beside the road. "Yes, worse luck. Three days back. My daughter ordered enough fabric to beggar me. You've business with him?" He glanced at her, sharp eyes assessing her dirty, tattered clothing, her worn pack.

"I've business, yes." Jassi fought the urge to collapse right there against the wall. She'd missed him again. She'd been sure that he'd slow a bit, to rest if nothing else. The gods knew that she needed rest, and she'd only been on the road for a double handful of days. Yandros had been travelling for much longer, stopping at each village and town on his way back to the capital with his cloth orders. Then again, he had a horse and cart. Jassi had lost her horse three days back to a broken leg.

The guard held his lamp a bit higher, looking at her, curiosity plain in his face. Finally he shrugged. "Well, the gate is closed. Unless you are known to someone in the town, I must ask you

to wait till morning to enter. And you still have not named your friend there." He pointed at the bard, who still lingered, in shadow, behind her.

Jassi waited for the bard to speak. No luck. "His name's Rook. He sings."

Rook moved forward into the light, smiling his slightly crooked, mocking smile. He met the guard's eyes, bowing, his instrument case shifting almost imperceptibly on his back. He was very practiced at bowing.

The guard smiled, his face lighting far beyond any ability of the lamp. "Rook! It's been almost a year since you passed this way!" He slid a large key into the gate's lock, struggling a bit to turn it. "I've missed your songs. You know, your song about Shantri's Chal-ice last Winter's Fest almost convinced me to leave the town and turn mercenary." He grinned. "Almost. Not quite. Though with my daughter's spending habits, the gods know I need the gold."

The gate swung wide as the guard strode out to clap Rook on the shoulder. Shaking her head silently, Jassi walked through, unnoticed, heading towards a well-lit two-story building proudly displaying a tavern's signboard. For the past three days, since the bard had appeared suddenly at the roadside, spooking her horse and causing its broken leg, he'd been following her. No explanation. No apologies, even when she'd had to kill the horse. Simply a courtly bow, a smile, and a low murmured, "We seem to be travelling in the same direction, milady." And she, unused to travel etiquette, had allowed him to travel with her. Behind her. Watching.

Of course, she had managed to get him to hand over enough gold to pay

her ma back for the dead horse.

Still, here, at the first large town they'd reached together, it would seem that he was well known, a celebrity. Jassi snorted. Well, at least, since he was so popular here, he would probably stay awhile, earn his keep by singing while she went on in search of Yandros.

Unthinkingly mimicking the guard, Jassi spat into the weeds, then pulled open the inn's heavy door.

She was hit by a wall of light, sound, and smell. Loud voices and laughter, the scent of good food, wood smoke, well-kept weapons and unwashed bodies. Jassi breathed deep, feeling more at home than she had for days. This place, while larger, was so similar to her ma's inn at home. A hint of homesickness nibbled at her ... but faintly. She'd promised Sasha she'd be able to catch up with the cloth merchant, be able to add her request for white silk, intricate lace, to the orders he'd be fetching back to the village. It was worth it, surely, to get her eldest sister out of the house, safely married to the fop she'd chosen, and no longer mooning about in the room she shared with Jassi.

If only she'd been able to catch him closer to home! But somehow she seemed always to fall farther behind. At this rate, he'd be in Kingstown before she reached him.

But after all, while inns like this were homey and welcoming, there were always more like it along her path, and she was seeing more of the world on her little trek than most of the folk back home ever had. Their view of the outside world was mostly secondhand, stories told by adventurers around a

good fire on a cool night like this one. In an inn so similar to this.

As she walked up to the bar, she heard a commotion behind her at the door. Cheering. Rook's voice, calm and sardonic. Something to do with some popular ballad.

Shaking her head slightly, Jassi looked up at the innkeeper. He was looking over her shoulder, smiling widely. His deep voice roared out beside her ear, nearly deafening her.

"Rook, you devil songbird, you! Come to seduce my last unmarried daughter? Or do you have new songs for us?" He squeezed his bulky figure out from behind the bar, heading for the table where Rook was allowing himself, with many a bow, to be seated. "Food first? Or wine? I'll not have it said that I made you play for us starved and parched." He clapped Rook on the back with a beefy hand.

Jassi winced, then snagged a passing server, a girl of about thirteen years. "Sorry." She smiled at the girl sympathetically ... the poor kittling would probably be working late tonight, serving drinks to those who came to hear the bard sing. She remembered nights like that from the time she'd spent as a serving maid at her mother's inn, before she'd escaped to work in the stables ... before she'd started grilling passing warriors on fighting techniques. "Before things get too hectic here, could I get some food and ale? Whatever's inexpensive and hot will do. Oh, and a room for the night. I've coin, but not enough to waste on fripperies."

The girl started to nod, then paused, glancing over at Rook. Who was watching Jassi. As always. "Are you

with him?"

Jassi shook her head. "No. We've been travelling together for the last few days, but only because we were headed in the same direction. I'm sure that he'll be staying here awhile, but I'm moving on tomorrow." Maybe, with luck, she could catch up with Yandros at the next town. The merchant surely had to rest sometime.

The serving girl pressed her lips together. "Then you're with him. Your food and lodging are on the house. Rook makes it worth Da's while in custom when he stops through. And Ma likes him. Sort of. If you're one of his, you stay here, eat here, free."

"One of his?" But the girl ignored Jassi's confused question, motioning her to choose one of the few tables still empty, then pushed her way swiftly through the fast-filling tavern into the kitchen.

One of his. One of his what? Mistresses? Gods forbid! Enough minstrels had passed through her ma's inn to convince Jassi not to fall for their honed words and quick-fleeing feet. No, she was her own person, at least as soon as this errand was done. Till then she was Sasha's, sort of. Her messenger, at least. Sasha had been adamant. Jassi was to follow that cloth merchant all the way to the capital if need be. And, even with the mundane quality of the mission, Jassi had to admit it had been interesting so far.

By the time the server had set her food down in front of her, a bowl of meat and mushrooms stewed in wine and a half-loaf of bread, and remembered that Jassi had ordered ale, not wine, Rook had already started to play. Sweet little crystal shards of melody

wove their way through the room, silencing speech, and even laughter, wherever they touched. Even Jassi, no great music lover, had to admit that the bard's songs were better able than most to tear at emotions. The words evaded her hearing, perhaps because of the attention she was paying to the food. Something about a girl on some quest. A hero. Ah. A quest for the chalice of the gods.

Jassi finished her food, leaning back in her chair. She could afford this one night to rest, to eat and drink and listen to songs of magic and derring-do. Tomorrow she'd be on the road again, refreshed and better able to chase down her prey. She chuckled softly. Perhaps listening to these songs was not such a great idea if they made her think of poor, bald, pot-bellied Yandros as prey.

Rook was playing a new melody. The chalice song must have ended. This one seemed even more noble and more heartrending than the last. Jassi strained to hear the words, but since she had been careful to seat herself near the door and as far from the bard's own seat as possible, she found herself missing much of the plot. It seemed to focus on the exploits of another heroine, and an old, tired, bitter dragon. Jassi was just starting to grasp the storyline when there was a sudden crash of broken crockery, then the sound of chair legs scraping against the floor as a man rose to stand, leaning on a table in front and to the left of her.

"No more." The voice was cold and grim. "No more singing, bard. Your songs hold too much blood, too much pain."

Still strumming the melody line,

Rook bowed his head elegantly at the speaker. "Many here enjoy my singing, friend. Perhaps, if you choose to give my songs the chance they deserve, you might also grow to appreciate them."

The man shook his head. From where she sat, Jassi could not see his face, but if it matched his voice she was sure she'd not want to be in the bard's place. His clothing was old and patched, farm wear. His hands, clenched on the table, were a farmer's, gnarled and work-worn. "I said, stop playing. No more of your songs, your magic."

"Magic, sir?" Rook's tone was as light and mocking as his smile. "My songs have only the magic of a skilled and creative musician, no more. Though I am, of course, flattered by your words." He bowed his head again, accepting tribute.

The farmer's knuckles whitened on the edge of the table. "If there is no magic in your tongue or harp, bard, tell me why my daughter chose that dragon's cave over my fields and hearth." He staggered out from behind the table, a bit unsteady, working his way through the silent crowd towards the bard.

Rook silently handed his harp to the serving girl, who had just refilled his wine glass. He smiled, a bit sadly Jassi thought, and stretched his hands, palms up, towards the angry farmer. "I do not determine the paths of others, friend. I merely sing of their deeds. Heroes make their own choices."

The serving girl slowly and carefully walked across the room with Rook's harp in her hands, disappearing into the kitchen. The farmer stood, silent, breathing deeply. A stillness filled the

room, in its own way as riveting as Rook's music.

"No." The farmer's voice was calmer, but even more cold. "No, I will not believe you. You are not as innocent as you claim." His fists clenched, he breathed in deeply, then the table crashed forwards, almost into the bard.

"Wait! Hold, you!" The innkeeper puffed up from behind the bar, wiping his hands on his smudged white apron. "You are new in town, Trebast, but you know enough of our ways to realize that you can't go around attacking folk in my inn, or breaking furniture and crockery." He smiled at the farmer, placing a hand, gentle for its weight, on the man's shoulder. "Calm yourself a bit and help us right that table, then have a drink on the house and listen to the good bard's songs. I'm sure he'll play something more to your liking." His grip on Trebast's shoulder tightened slightly. "Or if you don't think yourself able to relax and enjoy the evening, go elsewhere."

"Quiet, innkeep." One of the farmer's three drinking mates had risen now, holding a heavy tankard in his callused hand. "Trebast has a right to speak. And a right to make this bard pay for his actions."

Another farmer stood, slamming his hand, palm open, into the innkeeper's chest, pushing him back, away from the bard. "Don't get involved here. Trebast has waited long enough to give this warbler what he deserves. We'll not let any interfere."

Trebast stood facing the bard, rocking slightly back and forth, shaking his head, fists clenched. He made no further move towards Rook, seeming almost not to have noticed the

interference of his friends. As the fourth of the group got to his feet, Jassi could see other inn patrons squirming slightly, readying themselves for swift movement, or backing farther into shadow. For herself, she hoped, like these last, to avoid the situation. She looked about for the serving girl, hoping to pay her bill and escape to the peace of her room.

The innkeeper was also scanning the tavern for the girl. Just as Jassi spotted her in the entrance to the kitchen, his voice rang out across the room. "Thifane, run and get the guard." The girl sprinted through the room towards the door, but the third of Trebast's companions intercepted her.

"No you don't, brat." He reached out to grab her by the arms. "What, are you all in this together? You'd best pick your friends more carefully." He shoved the girl to one side sharply. Her head hit the edge of Jassi's table, and she slid to the floor. "No one leaves this place while that bard stands." He moved to block the door.

"Hey!" Jassi barely recognized her own voice. She rose from her chair, walking around the table to face the man. "Leave her alone!" She stooped to check on Thifane. Breathing. Good. Around her she heard chairs creaking, tables moving slightly. All hell was about to break loose.

Suddenly, one of Thifane's eyes opened. One hand raised slightly pointing, under the table, towards the door. Jassi raised her eyebrows slightly. Silently she mouthed, "Can you make it?" and was answered with a very faint, slow nod.

Jassi threw her an encouraging smile, then spun on her heels, round

and up, fist swinging to strike the farmer in the gut. As he staggered to one side, Thifane scrambled to her feet, pushed open the door, and darted through it.

After that, Jassi lost track of what was going on around her. It was not her first brawl. She had four well-grown siblings, after all, and had grown up in an inn. Still, she had little time to waste on gawking at the other action. She did hear enough furniture breaking, bellows of rage and pain, and various thumps and crashes to know that she was not alone in her battle.

The farmer was both larger and stronger than Jassi, his muscles hardened by years spent behind a plow. Fortunately, he was also drunk and slow. Had he been sober, Jassi's speed and the few tricks she'd picked up over the years might not have been enough to keep her whole. As it was, Jassi managed to keep just ahead of his enraged swings and grabs long enough to sweep up a full glass of clear spirits from a nearby table and slosh it into his face. While he staggered, rubbing huge fists across his eyes, she scooped up a heavy chair and brought it down hard on the back of his head.

As her opponent slumped to the ground, Jassi realized she was grinning. She swept her gaze around the room. The fight was still in full swing, with patrons taking sides, as far as she could see, almost indiscriminately. The innkeeper was holding his own, bashing heads with a heavy tankard as he pushed his way towards the bar. She heard running feet coming up the street: hopefully, the guard.

Then, without any reason she could explain, her eyes were drawn into a

deeply shadowed corner. Rook stood there, alone and quiet. The fight circled by him, leaving him totally untouched. He was smiling slightly, fingers strumming at phantom, invisible harp strings.

And he was watching her.

Beside her, the door swung open. Five uniformed guards pushed past her into the room, with Thifane close behind them. Within a few seconds, the fight was winding down. Then there was a silence, punctuated only by a few low groans, and the heavy, burbling breathing of one woman whose nose had been broken.

"Well." The leading guard's voice was rich with sarcasm. "If you are all quite finished, I want everyone out. If you live in town, go back to your homes. If you've rooms here, find them. The tavern is closed for the night." He glanced at the innkeeper, who was surveying his wrecked tavern with dismay. "Perhaps longer than just one night. Each of you brawlers can help to pay for this mess."

With a few sheepish looks, men and women started filing out of the tavern or up the stairs, many of them dropping coins on the bar, or on the few still-standing tables, as they went. The farmer who had first accused Rook was crying softly as his friends, still scowling, helped him out.

Jassi turned to Thifane. "Can you show me which room is mine?"

The girl nodded and started to turn towards the stairs, then paused. "Are you sure you don't want my ma to take a look at your head first? She knows a good bit about treating wounds."

"My head?" Jassi reached up to touch the side of her head, which was throbbing dully. Her hair was wet and

sticky. Not sweat sticky. She vaguely remembered her head hitting the door frame as she dodged her opponent's charges. "Um. I guess, if it looks bad..." She shrugged, then regretted it, fighting to keep her supper down.

Thifane led her past the guards, who had seated themselves and were talking to the innkeeper. The bard had disappeared. Just as well. Jassi was less than pleased with him.

By the time Jassi reached the kitchen, her head was aching enough to make it hard to walk. The room was warm, and just a bit smoky. Savory steam escaped in wisps from pots set to simmer on a low stove. Seated where she could stir the pots, smiling calmly, was a small but powerfully-built woman. The apron she wore did not quite conceal the fact that one of her legs was missing from the knee down. A crutch leaned against the wall close enough for the woman to grasp it easily. She smiled at Thifane, then looked Jassi up and down.

"A casualty? Pass down my herb basket, Fane, and fetch me a bowl of warm water from the stove. That sounded like a tidy little battle." She smiled at her daughter, then beckoned to Jassi. "Come here, girl, and kneel in front of me."

As Jassi complied, Thifane's mother rested a hand against her face, gently tilting her head to one side. Jassi felt old, long-hardened calluses against her cheek, and the cold smoothness of a large ring. Fingers parted her hair.

"My name is Marja, dear, and I've seen enough wounds in my time to ... hmm, not so bad as it looked."

Jassi relaxed slightly as her wound was washed out with warm water, then

tensed again as she heard Thifane whispering softly to her mother.

"Ah, is she, indeed?" Marja's voice held some odd emotion. "You'd best go help your father, Fane. This young lady and I need to chat a bit."

Thifane headed for the tavern, smiling back at Jassi over her shoulder.

Marja sighed softly, pressing a compress against Jassi's head. "So you are Rook's latest."

Jassi shook her head, holding the compress in place with her own hand as she turned to face the older woman.

"I'm not quite sure what you mean by that. Rook and I just happened to travel together briefly. Tomorrow we each will go our own way ... unless..." Jassi felt herself reddening slightly. "Unless ... you don't think...? He's truly not my type."

Marja's smile was tinged with bitterness. "No, he's not trying to seduce you ... not in the way that you mean, at any rate. I've seen the way he acts towards women he seeks to dally with and, from what my daughter says, you are not one." She reached to grasp Jassi's shoulders, looking deep into her eyes. "No, you he needs for something else entirely."

The pain in Jassi's head was starting to dull down again. Confusion was taking its place. "I don't understand."

Marja's hands dropped to her lap. She leaned back in her chair, eyes half closing. "Do you know why ravens follow wolves?"

The question was unexpected. "No, not really."

"Ravens are carrion birds. They feast on the kills of others. They follow wolves in the sure knowledge that where a wolf goes, there will be car-

nage." Marja smiled at Jassi's puzzled look. "Rook is a bard. He hunts down adventure like a raven does meat. Like the raven, he feeds off the battles of others."

Jassi shifted the compress to her other hand. "Um ... okay." She crossed her legs in front of her, trying to get comfortable. "And Rook's been following me for a few days, so you think he's ... no, that makes no sense."

Marja raised an eyebrow. "And why not?"

"Lady, I hate to offend you, but even if Rook takes after his namesake, I'm no wolf. I'm not seeking adventure, just an evasive cloth merchant. In a few weeks I'll be home preparing for my sister's wedding, not out fighting dragons."

"Oh, you're a wolf, girl ... a young, inexperienced wolf, but a wolf nonetheless. Rook always knows." She smiled again, sadly. "Always." A tremor ran through her half leg. "He's been at his business for long years. He's far older than he looks. Almost always girls, and not those you'd pick to look at. But he knows, and he follows. And he sings." She closed her eyes, her hands clasping and unclasping in her lap.

Jassi sat in silence. Then... "Look, he's wrong this time. I have to hunt down Yandros, then go back home. He's simply made a mistake, or you have."

"Really." Marja's voice was soft. "Maybe I am wrong. Maybe tomorrow you will leave here on your errand, and he won't be with you. Or maybe you'll just tell him to leave you alone. Rook's not an evil man. If you ask him to let you travel alone, he will. Maybe you'll catch up with Yandros. He often stops

off in a town eight leagues north of here. Rockridge, it's called. He has a son living there. It's your choice."

Jassi let the silence stretch again. Finally she looked up at Marja, meeting her eyes. "There's one thing I just don't understand. Perhaps I am a wolf. Perhaps I am bound for adventure ... but ... you've said it yourself. I'm young, and the only real fighting I've done is in bar brawls. Even in those ... well, if that farmer out there had been sober, I'd be lucky to be alive! Wouldn't Rook choose an experienced wolf to travel with, one more likely to survive?"

Marja's face was unreadable. She took the compress out of Jassi's hand,

checked the wound, then patted her shoulder softly. "Get off to bed with you, girl. I've work to do."

Sighing, frustrated, Jassi stood and turned to leave.

"Girl..." Marja's voice was very soft. Jassi turned to look at her.

The woman's head was bowed, one hand stroking the large, dark-jeweled ring on the other. She spoke, not meeting Jassi's eyes. "Girl, you should have paid more attention to the bard's songs tonight. No matter what way the battles go, who wins, who loses, who lives, who dies, still the carrion bird feasts."

Jassi left the town the next morning, heading north.

The bard followed her. ♣

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: MARCIE LYNN TENTCHOFF lives with seven cats, one bird, one tank full of fish, and all the rest of my family in (luckily) a large house in Gibsons, a small town on the Sechelt Peninsula of BC. Her novella *Sister's Keeper* appeared in *Horizons SF* (Volume 12, Number 2). "Raven Song" is her first professional sale.

ABOUT THE ARTIST: ANDREA BAEZA has been working towards a happy medium between art for profit and art for art's sake. So far so good. You can usually find her tattooing at Ritualistics Body Modifications ... or going deaf at some gig. There's nowhere near enough space to name all the bands she likes, but the current top five are Nomeansno, the Reverend Horton Heat, the Vandals, Big Rude Jake, and the Residents.



MITCHELL STUART

Suggested Listening:

I tend to have "theme music" when I'm working on a novel, but not so much with a short story. I'd just discovered Walt Koken's *Banjonique* (Rounder) not long before I started working on this story, and I suspect it had some influence. Despite its general cheerfulness, it does include "Snowbound Blues" and "Blizzard on the Backbone" so I'd go with that for recommended listening. Those with palates too refined to tolerate raw banjo might try Bela Fleck's *Tales From the Acoustic Planet* (Warner Brothers).

Whyte Laydie

Kate Riedel

illustrated by Mitchell Stuart

This wasn't the house in which Josh Wingate would have chosen to die.

It stood like a cenotaph at the end of the snow-filled driveway, one of those gaunt old farmhouses that was barely welcoming when occupied and bleak as the winter landscape when deserted.

He'd never liked this house. But then, come to think of it, he'd never been fond of any of the places he'd lived with Gloria. That was probably why, once the children were grown, he'd quit living with Gloria. Or was it the other way around?

Gloria preferred the estate in Florida from which she still kept an active eye on business. Josh was content enough up in the country where he'd been raised, alone with his CDs and, in the summer, his garden. But give the devil his due, Gloria was responsible for the wealth they enjoyed.

The CD player and the answering machine were among the few concessions that Josh had made to modern technology, and maybe the answering machine had been a mistake. Gloria's voice on the machine had been strong as ever, as youthful as she still looked. Josh knew his voice tended to quaver these days.

"There's been a break-in at the old house," Gloria's voice spoke from the tape. "You're there. Go check it out. I'll call again this weekend to make sure everything's all right." Male laughter in the background; one of those boys Gloria was rumored to keep on the side down there in Florida? Josh himself

hadn't felt any inclination in that direction for a good many years now. And why should that occur to me now? he thought.

"Probably just a vagrant wanting to get in out of the snow," he told the answering machine. But he called the hydro company to have the power in the house reconnected temporarily. The leaden sky told him if he didn't go now, he wouldn't have a chance to before Gloria called back.

Josh parked his car well to the side of the road. The last storm had left the long driveway drifted full, passable only on foot. Glazed drifts cracked under his boots, overloud in the cold air; the broken, crusted snow fought him at each step. Halfway to the house, Josh stopped, burdened by the heavy going, the almost physical weight of cold air and grey sky, the sudden pain in his chest. His doctor had told him to take it easy, but "Have to go sometime," he'd scoffed.

But I'd rather "sometime" wasn't in a snowdrift on a fool's errand for Gloria, Josh thought, waiting for his breathing to ease.

Pain subsided. Josh resumed his trek. A single crow cawed high in a dead elm, then flapped away into the silent grey woods bristling on the opposite side of the neglected field.

"One for sorrow," Josh recited, following it with his eyes, "two for joy..." But there was only one crow.

When he turned back from watching the crow, he saw he was almost at the house. And, just for a moment, it was spring, he was nineteen years old and there was...

...Ida, on the verandah, the first time he ever saw her...

•
"Make sure you get cash from those Potter girls," Josh's dad had said, with something like grim enjoyment.

It was only by careful management and the grace of God that Wingate's hardware store hadn't been among the local businesses to go down when Potter's bank failed. Potter himself was dead of a heart attack, no more than he deserved, some people said. His daughters now lived in the shabby house of a hardscrabble farm on which Potter had foreclosed a few years before, a farm not even his creditors had wanted.

...Ida, in her blue and white flowered dress, shivering slightly in the breeze that smells of rain and new green things, just enough memory of old snow to remind one to be glad winter's over.

Josh kept his eyes on the slim fingers counting out nickels and pennies to pay for the packets of seeds, acutely aware of each brief, accidental touch as she placed the coins in the palm of his hand, took the packets from his other hand.

"I wonder..." she said, then hesitated. Josh looked up into determined hazel-green eyes and sweet face under dark braids inexpertly pinned into a crown. She stumbled on, "I don't really know anything about how to put in a garden..."

"This is my last delivery for the day," Josh said. "Let's take a look."

Nearly two hours later, a pile of last year's weeds lay at the end of the old garden. As Josh rested on the spade, he caught a glimpse of a young girl's face framed in golden-blond hair at one

of the upper windows of the house.

"That's Gloria," Ida said, following his eyes. "My sister. This has all been awfully hard on her. She was doing so well at school, had so many beaux. And now..."

But Josh was looking at the lowering sun. "Omigosh, Dad's gonna have my hide. Mom too, if I'm late for supper."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have..."

"It's okay." Now it was Josh's turn to be hesitant. "There's, uh, still a lot to be done before you can start planting. If you want, I can, uh, come back tomorrow..."

"I've already taken shameful advantage of you." He looked from her face to her hands, green-stained from pulling weeds, lines of dirt under the fingernails. He'd bet there were blisters on her palms. He was close enough to catch her scent. Perspiration and roses.

"I don't mind."

All the way home, Josh's heart fluttered like a flag in the spring breeze. "Ida, sweet as apple cidah..." he found himself playing on his treasured Fairbanks Whyte Laydie that night. Over and over, smiling to himself, until his mother asked him to please play something else.

...On this same verandah, playing it as a joke, laughing, and Ida laughing back, sending his heart into somersaults...

Funny, he'd forgotten about the banjo...

Or did I just not remember?

"Josh isn't one to dwell on the past," Gloria always said. Smiling, indulgent.

Guess I'm not, he thought.

Cold seeped through boots and gloves. He broke his way through the final drift that hid the steps and fumbled with numb fingers for the key in his pocket.

He didn't need it. The glass had been smashed, allowing a hand to reach through to the deadbolt. Broken glass lay on the inner doorsill. Down the hall in the kitchen, cupboard doors hung open, old pots and pans helter-skelter on the counter. Probably the intruder in search of forgotten canned goods, finding none.

But he hadn't gone supperless. A pile of black chicken feathers, curled, leathery feet, guts stiff in frozen blood, lay in the sink. The head lay on top of the mess, comb and wattles dry and stiff, eyes dull pits, beak open as if to announce a dawn that would never arrive.

Somehow that summer he'd spent every free moment at the farm, repairing the old chicken coop once the garden was in.

His parents assumed—and had not necessarily approved—that Gloria, two years younger than Josh and an acknowledged beauty, was the attraction.

Josh did bring small presents for Gloria—the latest popular novel, issues of the fashion magazine to which his mother subscribed—hoping to draw her out, for Ida's sake.

For Ida, he brought two broody hens and a black rooster in a wooden crate.

The rooster proved a devilish old bird, impossible to keep penned and

finally vanishing. But he'd done his job. Ida was delighted with the healthy chicks.

She'd taken even more pride in the feathery carrots, leaf lettuce and radishes and green onions big enough for a salad, rows of corn already knee-high, interspersed with hills of squash and potatoes. There'd be enough tomatoes and beans to can for the winter. "I can get you jars at cost," Josh told her.

"What do I do with these?" she asked of the pile of weeds they'd dug out together that first day.

"Save 'em, chop 'em up and dig 'em into the garden this fall," he'd said. "Green manure, my dad calls it." He kicked at the pile, and the top layer of weeds came away on his boot.

Ida clutched his arm. "Oh, no. Who could have done it?"

The black rooster's head had been torn off. It lay beside the body, beak open, eyes dull pits.

"Stray dog, maybe," Josh had said, laying his hand over hers...

Josh found matches in his pocket, shoved firewood and old newspaper into the wood stove, and warmed himself at the small fire before scraping the remains of the dead chicken out of the sink and onto the flames. The burning feathers would stink up the kitchen for a while. He returned to the door.

A chill breeze carried stray snowflakes through the broken pane. Should have brought hammer and nails, piece of plywood, he thought as he picked up broken glass. Some boards about the right size beside the

stove. Used to be a tool box down cellar.

Josh flicked the begrimed switch at the top of the cellar stairs and descended cautiously, gripping the rail. The cellar smelled, even in the cold of winter: cellar smells, damp, dirt, and rot.

At the edge of the pool of light cast from the single bulb dangling from a central beam, Josh saw rough shelves where a few fruit jars still remained. Their contents, obscured by cobwebs thick as felt, surely predated his time here. Gloria hadn't been one to put up anything from a garden.

No tool box. Josh groped cautiously along the back of the shelves and felt only a handful of rags. Inside it, something moved, and he jerked his hand back, bringing the rags with it, dropping them in a cloud of dust on the floor. He laughed shakily as mice scattered into the shadowy corners, then picked up the dusty, gnawed rag.

He turned the rotted fabric over in his hands, seeking a whole patch, one protected enough from dust and damp to retain its original colors. White flowers on a blue background...

...Ida in her white-flowered blue dress, sitting on the verandah steps while he played his banjo. Gloria sat apart, leafing through a magazine, but Ida joined him in clear, sweet harmony on the old-time songs he'd learned from his mother. "Rosewood Casket," "Little Old Log Cabin," "Two Sisters of Binnorie."

*He courted the younger with
glove and ring,*

*Binnorie, oh Binnorie.
But he loved the elder above
anything...*

So what if she was older than he was? He was hard-working, and responsible, and already almost a partner in the hardware store.

*He courted the younger with
brooch and knife...*

He'd sing to his best double-thumbing accompaniment on his Whyte Laydie:

*But he loved the elder above
his life...*

And he'd meant every word of it.

She went away, Josh thought.

He thrust the rag to the back of the shelf.

The tool box was on the next shelf down. He climbed the stairs slowly and turned off the light, leaving the cellar to the dark, mold, and mice.

Boards nailed over the broken pane, Josh carried the tool box back to the kitchen. From the window, he could discern the outline of where the garden had been. Was that a movement in the trees behind the garden? The vagrant? Or perhaps the crow he'd frightened from the dead elm.

The wind was picking up, and the falling snow, previously fitful, almost obscured the woods where the crow had retreated. Look over the rest of the house, then put out the fire and get out of here while the getting's good.

Nothing in the living room, although perhaps, judging by the dust cover slightly askew on the sofa, the vagrant had spent the night here. Josh twitched the cover straight.

He climbed the stairs to the second floor, turned on the hall light and paused for breath before glancing into each bedroom. A gust rattled the house and snow spat against the grimy glass of the hall window from which he had first seen Gloria watching him. He hesitated at the door to the attic. Surely no need to check there.

Gloria would ask, if he didn't. Josh opened the door and flipped the switch at the bottom of the stairs. His shadow divided and wavered, caught between the light from behind and that from above. The unfinished treads creaked under his feet as he ascended the narrow stairs toward the yellow square where the trap door had been left propped open.

Josh thrust his head and shoulders cautiously through the trap. As in the basement, a single bare bulb dangled from the ceiling, leaving the corners in shadow.

Nothing living; no mice, no bats. No clutter of discarded furniture or boxes of papers, no memories in mothballs. Only a small table in the middle of the floor, and on it a candle obscured by a winding sheet of wax, blackened, he supposed, by years of dust. And beside the table...

Josh pulled himself into the attic and knelt on the floor, cradling the Whyte Laydie in his lap. He wiped the dust from the peghead and ebony fingerboard, the inlaid pearl griffin—his mother had said it looked more like a fish—the pearl star at the fifth fret, the diamond-shaped pearl position markers—oh, the familiar feel of the frets under the fingers of his left hand! Mute now, strings loose and

rusted, the slashed skin of the head warped and gaping. The bridge was gone, probably fallen out when...

Gloria did that. Gloria slashed the head.

But neck and fingerboard were unwarped; tension brackets darkened, but not corroded; pot undistorted despite years of strain from the slashed head. Older than me by a decade and still solid. Fairbanks built them sound. No reason I can't have it fitted with a new head, bridge, strings. Learn to play again. Old men are allowed their eccentricities.

Josh laid his hand on the table top to pull himself up, and felt a flat object, unnoticed before for the dust. Like old pastry, rolled out, folded over, and then forgotten until it had gone dry and hard.

Under the dust, it was cream colored... Rawhide. Calfskin, maybe. Had that quarrel bothered Gloria's conscience enough that she'd bought the calfskin to replace the ruined head, then, somehow, never given it to him?

He and Gloria had only quarrelled once that he could remember. Not long after they were married...

Josh, searching for something else, had found the banjo shoved to the back of the cubby hole under the stairs and, forgetting everything else, sat down with it, petting and talking to it as if it were a favorite cat strayed and come home. Tuning it automatically, picking a few notes of a melancholy tune...

...by the bonny mill dams of Binnorie...

The banjo cried aloud as the bright blade of the paper knife slashed

down, splitting the head, and he'd jumped up to face Gloria, cold rage to her hot fury.

But the quarrel had ended there. Why? He could feel the aftershock of his rage even now, across the decades.

Josh tucked the folded skin under the loose strings and levered himself creakily to his feet.

The light went out. Josh staggered as if pushed. Behind him, the trapdoor slammed shut as his head hit the table, and then his body hit the floor in a clatter of rusty banjo strings and board-dry skin.

Was that his heart beating a fading, rhythmic counterpoint to the rattle of the wind under the shingles? Or was it footsteps growing faint as they retreated first down the attic stairs, then down the stairs to the ground floor?

Light footsteps, not country boots but dancing slippers. Josh saw the man only from the back, an elegant black suit disappearing around the corner of the house.

"That's Mr. Dunham," Ida said when Josh told her there had been a stranger in the house. "Gloria's friend. He was a teacher, she says, at the private school she attended before Daddy died. It was nice of him to stop by and ask after her. No one else from our old crowd has."

Josh agreed, perfunctorily. By this time, he'd decided Gloria was a spoiled brat, to be put up with only for Ida's sake.

Josh opened his eyes to complete

darkness. Didn't think death would be like this...

The wind drumming against the empty house restored memory. He could move, albeit stiffly, and the painful bruise on his head proved he wasn't dead. He was still clutching the banjo. He reached out with his other hand, found the table, used it to pull himself to his feet, and felt in his pocket for matches.

The sputtering light of the candle cast the uneven floorboards into sharp relief. He could see marks on the floor where the dust had come away on his clothes. Rusty lines. A triangle? He scrubbed away dust with his foot. A star pattern of crossed lines such as children draw, one-two-three-four-five, and there's a star... Josh shook his head, wincing at the renewed pain.

The trap door wasn't locked, and light seeped through the cracks around the closed door at the bottom of the stairs. So the storm hadn't taken out the hydro. Josh blew out the candle and, clutching the banjo and the folded hide, stumbled gratefully into the brilliant light of the second floor hall and down the stairs to the kitchen.

A cold draft had blown the fire out. At the end of the front hall, the recently patched door stood wide open. Snow already formed deep drifts on the hall floor, whirling eddies continuing to invade from the white maelstrom outside. Beyond the white, it was dark. Afternoon was long over.

Won't get home tonight, Josh thought.

He returned to the kitchen and lit

another fire in the wood stove. He'd want water. He filled a battered enamel wash basin with snow and set it to melt on the stove.

Now what? Sleep? Pointless to stay awake, won't be able to get out until morning. Seemed to remember, though, that you ought to try to stay awake after a blow on the head.

Josh set the basin to the back of the stove and put the stiffened skin to soak in the warming water. Then he sat down at the kitchen table and began patiently to loosen the nuts of the brackets that held the slashed banjo head in place.

It had been at this table... *I did* meet Dunham, Josh thought. Saturday evening. Dinner. Chicken, of course, and pink-skinned potatoes. Green and wax beans mixed, sliced tomatoes, a cucumber and onion salad. Hot, not like tonight...

"I owe you a meal," Ida said. "After all, would we be eating at all, without your help?"

Josh arrived in time to help set the table.

Gloria turned up only after everything was ready. Dunham was with her. He sat opposite Josh, an older man, polished, distinguished looking, Josh supposed, in his elegant black suit and dancing shoes. They made polite conversation, but Josh couldn't warm to the man. Dunham made him feel naive.

I sat straight across from Dunham, Josh thought as he eased off yet another bracket. But I can't for the life of me remember what he looked like.

Dunham left after supper, and Gloria with him.

"She's spending so much time alone with him," Ida said. "And people *will* talk. Gloria's so... I thought she'd get over things, after a while. She's very clever, you know, not just beautiful. But she just won't..." Ida's voice trailed off as she sighed and began to clear the table.

"I'll help you clean up," Josh had said.

"You don't have to."

"I don't mind."

"I'll bet your mother thinks I can't cook," Ida said as they stood shoulder to shoulder, washing and drying the dishes.

"Well..."

"She does, doesn't she?" Ida laughed.

"But she's wrong. I'll tell her she should have been here."

Ida lifted clean plates onto the cupboard shelf. When she lowered her arms, turning from the cupboard and toward him, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to put his arms around her. Her skin was warm under his hands, and the nape of her neck smelled of roses on a hot summer day.

"Sorry," he said after a moment, although he wasn't.

"I don't mind."

"I don't want you to think..." Heck, say it. "I want to marry you. You don't have to say anything right away," he hurried on. "But think about it, please? I'll have a good living as soon as my dad makes me a partner. Gloria can live with us if you want, we can see that she gets to meet more people her own age..."

"What about your parents?"

"They won't be able to help liking you. Just think about it..."

She placed a hand on either side of his face, and he put his arms around her again, breathing in the scent of her skin and hair. Her lips were soft and yielding as rose petals.

"I think," he'd said, after a few minutes, moving back reluctantly, his voice catching, "maybe I should go home now."

"You're *such* a nice young man," she'd said, laughing, but with the same catch in her voice.

Halfway home, he realized he'd forgotten his Whyte Laydie. He almost went back for it, but didn't. He liked the idea of leaving it with Ida, a part of himself, a token.

The last bracket loosened, Josh eased off the tension hoop and the old head. He lifted the now-soft skin from the basin, gently shaking excess water from it. Drops hissed on the hot stove, releasing an elusive scent as they vaporized, and something fell out of the folds of the skin and clattered on the floor. Something the size and color of the lost bridge. Josh picked it up and put it in his pocket.

He wrapped the skin around the flesh hoop, fitted it over the pot and under the tension hoop, and pulled up the excess so the head was tight but not too tight. Taking his time, doing it right. At last he slid the brackets into place, used his pocket knife to trim the excess skin, and began to tighten the brackets, a turn at a time, careful to keep the tension even.

It was well into the early hours of the morning when he finished. He

spread a blanket from the upstairs closet in front of the stove, then stopped. It didn't seem right to just leave the scraps.

He retrieved them and placed them gently on the fire. The remaining dampness evaporated with a faint sigh. Josh lay down and pulled a second blanket over him.

Down the front hall, the door opened...

As if watching through a telescope, Josh saw himself, so young in that peculiarly heavy light of a late afternoon in August. Nothing's entirely certain in this world, even when you're young. But there was a summer's worth of shared work, and she had wanted him last night as much as he had wanted her, he was sure of it.

No answer to his first knock. Nor to the second or third. Try the screen door. Unlatched. Step into the hall. "Anybody home?"

No one in the kitchen. Everything neat and clean and in its place, as he and Ida had left it the night before.

"Hello?" he called and, still unanswered, entered the living room.

Gloria lay face down on the sofa, shaking with silent grief. He knelt by her and asked, "What's wrong? Where's Ida?"

Gloria twisted to face him. She wasn't sobbing, she was laughing. She pulled him to her and kissed him. When she finally released him he looked down to see that he had no flesh, just clothes over a skeleton. The embrace had absorbed him, the way a snail, creeping along a leaf, feeding, leaves behind it only the

framework of stem and veins...

The storm still raged when Josh rose stiffly, well into the day. He had to push the door against wind and drifted snow in order to get snow to melt for water. He searched the cupboards for a bit of tea or coffee that might have been left behind but, like the vagrant before him, found nothing. He dug through his pockets, found some packets of sugar and cat-sup tucked there the last time he'd stopped at a fast food place, and dissolved the sugar in boiling water.

Feeling better for the hot, sugary, if tasteless drink, he picked up the banjo and gently tapped the new head. The cream-colored skin responded sweetly to his fingers.

He untangled the strings and wiped each with his handkerchief. They left blood-like streaks on the fabric, but were sound under the rust. He had the bridge.

He pulled the object from his pocket. It wasn't the bridge. Just a piece of bone, perhaps the end of a rib. The right size for a bridge, anyway, with a little shaping. Nothing better to do. Josh pulled out his knife. The dream was still vivid in his head. But, he thought, that wasn't the way it happened...

He'd found Gloria alone, sobbing on the sofa. "She's gone," Gloria choked out. "She went away. She went away with Dunham."

He hadn't believed her.

She'd thrown herself into his arms, still sobbing. Her breath, as she kissed him, smelled of sage, and he wondered for a moment why he

thought she should have smelled of roses...

And I forgot Ida, Josh thought. I forgot Ida. I didn't remember her for over fifty years. Until now.

"Josh isn't one to dwell on the past," Gloria always said.

His parents had loved Gloria, his father especially, as Gloria took over more and more duties in the store. "Maybe she can't cook," he'd said to Josh, "but she's a dab hand at figures. Bet she's good at other things too," nudging Josh, who blushed at the unaccustomed familiarity, while Gloria said demurely, "He's a nice young man." And when his father died suddenly...

He was recalled from the surge of unaccustomed anger by the knife cutting into his forefinger. Blood dyed the unfinished bridge, splattered in brilliant drops on the table top. He wiped the bridge clean, then wrapped his handkerchief tightly around the wound and resumed his work with redoubled care. Take your time, do it right. Don't let anger ruin it.

My father was never sick a day in his life. Aunt Frances lived to be ninety, I'm near that myself, and my father wasn't more than fifty...

...It was Gloria who not only held the business together, but made it grow. Josh would have made a living. But Gloria made the connections, said the magic words, turned one dollar into two, ten, a hundred...

■

Josh set his knife aside and examined his work. The right height, feet just wide enough to rest firmly on the head, five notches to separate five strings.

Not the place I'd have chosen to die, he thought as he set the bridge down and absently brushed bone chips and dust into a small pile next to the darkening drops of blood. Daylight, as far as he could tell through the storm that still raged on the other side of the window, was fading.

His stomach rumbled. Not dead yet.

He boiled some more water, washed the cut, and rebandaged it with the cleanest edge torn from his handkerchief. Then he made a weak parody of hot tomato juice with the packets of catsup.

Unsatisfactory but hot supper finished, he sat down to restring the banjo.

It was completely dark by the time Josh began to tune the banjo. Third string to fourth at seventh fret; second to third at fourth fret; first to second at third; fifth to first at fifth ... forgotten for well over half a century, but sitting in the attic of his brain, waiting.

The fingers of his left hand fell into place at the frets as if coming home. The third finger and thumb of his right hovered over the new head, then dropped across the strings in quick succession.

He didn't remember the tune, but the Whyte Laydie did.

*There were two sisters sat in a
bower,
Binnorie, O Binnorie,
There came a knight to be*

*their wooer
By the bonny mill dams of
Binnorie.*

His fingers repeated the remembered pattern.

*The elder stood by the river
shore,
The younger came and
pushed her o'er.*

Was that what happened? No. But Ida didn't just go away, and Gloria knew it. And so did I ... or would have...

The double-thumbed fifth string wove a bright thread through the melancholy of the minor chords.

*Sink on, nor hope for hand or
glove,
For your true love shall be my
love...*

Was she jealous? Not Ida. Ida had no reason to be jealous. But neither did Gloria...

*For your true love shall be my
love, the banjo sang in reprise.*

Gloria used to tell me she loved me.

Ida never told me that, nor I her. Perhaps I should have. But we didn't need to.

But Gloria needed to. Because it wasn't me she loved.

Anger washed over him, anger at all those lost years, until the discord under his fingers recalled him.

*A famous harper passing by
The sweet pale face he
chanced to spy.*

*He made a harp of her breast
bone...*

She *didn't* go away.

She's still here.

He shuddered, his fingers suddenly nerveless. But the banjo played on.

*Whose sound would melt a
heart of stone.*

Snow rattled at the windows, and a sudden gust of wind shook the whole house.

Josh heard the front door blow open with a bang, wind and snow howling down the hall, preceding Dunham into the kitchen.

Dunham wore no overcoat, had had no time to remove one, but his head, his elegant black suit, his dancing slippers were dry. He looked exactly as he had when Josh had first faced him over the same table, so many years ago. Except now, of course, he was younger than Josh.

"You've become a tough old bird."

Josh's fingers continued to fret and frail of their own accord.

"The attic was supposed to be the end of you."

Only the banjo replied:

*He laid the harp upon a stone
Where it began to play
alone...*

"What, no questions?" Dunham asked.

"Why did she have to destroy even the memory?" Josh asked.

"You were happier that way, weren't you?" Dunham smiled.

"More comfortable, perhaps. That isn't the same thing."

"Gloria's had her happiness," said Dunham. "And so she should, having paid handsomely for it. But what about you? We should talk."

Josh shook his head, fingers still moving over frets and strings. "Why this ... thing?"

"Thing? When once you couldn't wait to feel it under your hands?" And when again Josh had no reply, "Call it

a joke on Gloria. I can offer you the opportunity—"

"No. You've already cheated me."

Dunham shrugged. "Somebody had to lose."

Josh's left fingers fretted the beginnings of a final tag.

"But the song's not over," said Dunham. "Don't you remember how it ends? I do." He sang softly, in a voice of remarkable charm:

*"And the last tune the harp
did play,
'Twas my sister did me
betray."*

Josh's fingers twitched, but didn't miss a note.

Dunham smiled more broadly. "For me, forgiveness is academic. But of course you'll forgive Gloria. You're such a nice young man."

The Whyte Laydie protested as Josh's nails scraped across the new head before biting into his palm.

"It's not mine to forgive," he said, as his fingers lifted before they could damage the skin, then relaxed, dropping over the strings in a reprise of the tag.

"No, of course not. What you want is revenge."

The fingertips of Josh's left hand were raw with unaccustomed work over strings and frets. The cut on his forefinger had broken open; blood was seeping through the bandage. But the banjo played a break and resumed the melody.

"Did she suffer?" asked Josh.

"Of course," said Dunham. "It wouldn't have worked otherwise. She screamed," he went on, watching Josh. "She cried for you to help her."

He had smoothed out the little pile of bone dust and chips as he spoke. Now he wet the tip of his finger deliberately on his tongue and, with saliva and the drops of Josh's blood that had dried on the table top, formed a sticky ink with which he drew, as if casually, a rusty line angled upward through the bone dust.

"You gave Gloria everything," Dunham went on. "Your little living became her empire. And see how she repaid you." His finger drew another line, horizontally to the left.

The sweet voice of the head resonated behind the banjo's strings.

"She bought you." Dunham said as his finger angled downward, a third line crossing the first. "With her sister. With Ida. You were home in bed, dreaming of her soft body, while I was having it."

"Ida was never yours," said Josh.

"Dreaming of that sweet skin that smelled of roses," Dunham went on. "While by then it smelled only of blood. Can you forgive that? Your Whyte Laydie," he continued when Josh didn't appear to hear him. "Listen to her now."

Yes, *listen*, the Whyte Laydie whispered under Josh's fingers.

Dunham's finger moved again, a fourth line angling up across the first and second.

"It's your turn now, Josh. Your Whyte Laydie wants revenge. Can't you hear her?"

"I can hear her," Josh smiled.

"And I will give it to you." Dunham smiled back as his finger began the last downward stroke.

Josh's right hand shot from the banjo head to scatter the dust and

chips before the pentacle could be completed. The banjo clattered to the floor as his left hand clutched at his chest.

"Tough old bird—he might even live to thank the snowplow driver. At any rate, the devil doesn't have him yet."

"Quiet, he's conscious." The second ambulance attendant bent closer to catch the words Josh struggled to form. "Something about a lady. You don't suppose there was someone

else here?"

"This is what he means," said the first.

"That old banjo? Bring it along if it keeps him happy, but let's get a move on."

"Fairbanks Whyte Laydie, number two," the first attendant said reverently as he laid it next to Josh. "Not the professional model; that was the number seven. This was the one for the ordinary guy who just loved his banjo." 🍁

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: KATE RIEDEL was born and raised in Minnesota and is now a card-carrying Canadian who lives in Toronto with 1 poet, 2 cats, and 3 banjos.

ABOUT THE ARTIST: MITCHELL STUART works graphics at ITV and illustrates freelance on the side. He believes there's a time and place for all types of music, but when creating, he prefers techno/ambient sounds of "Future Sound of London."



FAHNESTALK©98

Suggested Listening:
Turn everything off, then listen.

Duende

by Apollonia Leaf
illustrated by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Santa Monica Beach State Park, ca. 1966

There is nothing like a sea wind. A true ocean wind. Nothing that comes off a lake, a gulf, or a sheltered bay is the same as a wind like the one that blows onto the coast of California straight from Japan, straight from Siberia, straight from Tahiti and the Sandwich Isles, scented with thousands of miles of wild water and storms, huge distances that used to be marked on maps only with dolphins and whales and the warning, hic sunt dracones.

Mare Pacificum, he was thinking. *This was where we stopped.* The Portuguese sailed on to the Japans, but his people came for this continent only, wound up sealing it as theirs with their blood and their names, and then disappeared into its dirt just as they had sent down to the dirt those who were here before them. Only the names lingered, and they fade too. Like this city's, which his people founded as *La Ciudad de Nuestra Señora de los Angeles*, whose mayor now was a German who called it *Lasangeles*.

But all of that was mortal life, and mortal life quit mattering to him long, long ago. In an era when the hills here were marked with three or four missions,

and the disease and the conversions had started. There remained a big dark cross at Olvera Street that had been here in his time; the rest was novelty.

Which was fine with him. He liked novelty. It kept him entertained, and it kept him invisible. Both good things.

The Santa Monica Pier was always good hunting. Under the strung lights and the loud carousel was the underlife of any mortal party: the pickpockets, muggers, buggers, drunks, junkies ... they would be down below, on the lower level or on the beach itself, wandering among the dark pilings with their frosting of barnacles and algae. Someone turned up dead down there about twice a week.

When he was in town, even a little more often than that.

But, as with all things in recent decades, records had gotten better. Police had gotten interested in small matters like little nibbles along the neck. Better now to grab one in the dark and take him a mile out to sea after finishing, to let the fish and crabs add their nibbles, to make the absence of blood less intriguing when the body came back to shore. If it did.

Inconvenient, but still easier than most kills.

And the rest of the time, there was the club in town, the amusingly named Ash Grove with its population of mortal folkies and immortal blooddrinkers who listened to humans wail the blues there through the late hours. There had even been the old Delta singer who'd walked into

the club one night on a gig, looked around, looked directly at the vampires one by one, his big dark eyes sliding past the mortals without question or hesitation, muttered "*loup-garou*," and gone to the bar for straight whiskey.

The bluesman had opened his first set by saying, "we got the devil heah wid us tonight folks, so y'all be watchful. This stage has known the print of the cloven hoof, um-hmm," and then made the music of a sad, bitter and forgiving angel. All night.

And he, since he played, had watched the old bluesman acutely, picked up the fingerings, listened for the fractional syncopations the man could hide in simple twelve-bar blues. The artistry, the soul, African transplanted in slavery to the Americas and then freed to poverty for generations, was far from the gypsy music of his home country, and yet shared some powerful truth with it, the thing that in Andalusia they called *duende*, an access to the darkness that was in a human soul, an alchemy in art that could wring that darkness into a great joy of the heart—even a mortal one. Or perhaps only a mortal one, since the artistry of it was beyond his reach, even after nearly five centuries of loving his instrument...

"*Esto es una mujer, Paco*," Dominquin had said, putting the small wooden box in his hands. "*Ella llora y ora, ella quema y queja, y mas que nada, ella canta.*" (This is a woman, little Francisco. She weeps and she prays, she burns and complains, and most of all, she sings.)

His mind filled now with the image

of old Dominguin, the Andaluzeno, native of the country shaped like a bull's hide, who talked about something you couldn't see and the priests didn't know, something about the soul, which was *duende*. It was like the thing that was hidden in women, but also even stronger than that, little Francisco. The Andaluzeno was telling this to a boy who had none of a man's hair yet, none of a man's needs, and the instrument that Dominguin said was a woman sat in that boy's hands like all the mysteries in the world. Something's in there, Paco. Something hidden in the wooden box with its strings pulled from deer's gut, its soundhole covered with a grille like the one between you and the Father in the confessional ... the old words you sent through that grille, bless me for I have sinned, and the words that always came back, *ego te absolvo*, I forgive you...

Guitar notes ... the veering of the onshore breeze was bringing the notes of a melody and a bassline to his ears.

He wasn't so hungry that he wouldn't investigate.

A moment later he was approaching a figure sitting in the sand in front of lifeguard tower 22, about a third of a mile south down the beach. He came up from behind but didn't touch, simply said, "Hi."

The guitar player didn't react with fear. Stoned or stupid, maybe. She just turned around and said "Hi," and then paused for a good look at him.

He was a medium sized man in this era, though he'd been tall in his own. His hair was black, and the wind was whipping it around his

shoulders; that made him a hippie in this place and time. His clothing was simple, as it usually was these days: bluejeans, a light sweater, a fringed buckskin jacket. His eyes were dark and large, and he had a lush black moustache that ran down nearly to his jawline, another hippie touch.

The girl was wearing hippie signatures, too. Long straight hair, parted in the middle and braided into Indian plaits. Jeans and a blue workshirt thickly embroidered with flowers and birds. And the ubiquitous love beads, just simple glass beads on a string, but in this time and place they amounted to a whole social and political manifesto. So they smiled at each other, allies. And the vampire smiled inside himself, differently.

"You play?" said the girl. He nodded and reached out a hand, squatting down next to her in the sand.

She passed him the guitar. It was a cheap instrument, acoustic, strung with poor nylon strings, but it was a guitar and it came to his hand like a pet. He corrected the tuning as well as he could, though the strings and posts were both so bad that the tuning was sure to slip after only a few notes. Then he let his hands go to work, and his mind go to dreams.

She was a pretty girl, not very formed, very young. And still small, still a hundred pounds or less. She was watching his fingers, long and slender fingers with small knuckles, perfect for a guitarist, as he worked through the Malaguena, and then went backwards in time to *gitano* melodies, and forward to the bridges of one or two songs that were high on the rock'n'roll playlist that month.

"Wow, you really do play," the girl said. "That's amazing." She leaned forward, studying the set of his fingers on the strings at rest. "You should be in a band—or are you?" Now her eyes came up to his.

"Not exactly." He had a little amused smile. "I do backup for bands sometimes." He passed the guitar back to her. "You?"

She laughed. "Oh sure. No, I just..." she looked at him, and decided to say it exactly. "I play for the wind. I just make stuff up—I don't know anything."

His eyebrows went up. Put up, or shut up. She nodded, resigned. "I don't know how, you know." He nodded again. And she was right, she didn't know how—but she was finding her way into the instrument note by note, looking for melodies, looking for resonance ... she had a way of coupling notes that appealed to him, telling the same melody twice, as if trying for counterpoint in the melody and then having an ordinary two-string bass beat anchoring it. Naive, but enough to be charming, and something more. It might be the beginnings of a true musical intelligence; certainly there was a genuine and individual spirit trying to find a voice in the strings, the mark of someone who should stay with the instrument. The accident of tripping across something so close to its beginnings pleased him.

"Why are you down here alone?"

"Why are you?" she shot back.

He smiled. "I asked you first." His eyes said, *It's not the same, and you know it.*

A shrug. "My mom's out on a

date." She looked him in the eyes. "I come down here all the time. Nothing bad has ever happened." She thought for a moment and laughed, "Weird stuff, but nothing bad. There's always someone around."

"Like me," he said softly.

"If you'd been around, I would've remembered," she said, momentarily bold. "Most of the freaks are down at Venice, not here. You really play professionally?"

"Sure." Always amusing, the short-cut way of impressing girls. In one place it's daring the bulls, in another it's a certain accent; here it's being a boy in a band. He spoke on impulse: "Want to come to a session? There's one tonight."

The girl's face reflected her thought: *there it is*. The pitch. The famous "one thing" her mother said was all men wanted.

He ignored the expression on her face. "Tracks for some local group called the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band." What the hell, he thought, everyone has a groupie at a session these days, why not me? The girls with bangs down to the eyelashes, the eyes heavily lined with black or brown, over and under. Some of them with pale blue above it, like that English model. And all with long straight serious hair, parted in the middle, brushed to the sheen and texture of cornsilk, and more beautiful than flags in the wind. They sat in rows along the punchboard walls of the soundproofed rooms, passed joints and giggled. They whispered about their rock'n'roll boyfriends, and worried about each other, because they were predators in their own way.

"Thanks, but no." She smiled. He looked at the face, still forming, almost nothing written on it by time yet.

"You think I'm lying," he said with a small smile.

"I *think* I'm not going to get in your car," she shot back.

He flashed a wicked grin. War. "You usually pass for eighteen, don't you? And you're twelve or thirteen, right?"

Bang. A girl pretending to be almost a woman, and she usually got away with it. No way she could know that this one guy had senses that told him exactly what hormones were and weren't circulating in her blood. Or that, as he played, he set the rhythm of his thoughts to the heart he heard beating strongly in her chest, the slightly slowpaced heartbeat of someone who swam or ran a great deal.

She was reacting to both the strangeness and the correctness of what he said. Fear and pleasure. Be strange, but not too strange, that's what the hippie chicks want. Even the babies.

"Okay, you're right. I'm complete and total jailbait, okay?" Lots of intelligence in her smile now. She liked the challenge, and she liked coming out in the open to be herself. He envied her the pleasure.

"Someone should be watching you," he said abruptly. "You're a nice girl." In his day, such a girl was never alone, not even in the poorest families. This was a girl who would have a clean life, a moral life, a noticed life that would be enveloped by other people. Not his kind.

"Oh, ew, nice?" But she was

relaxing her guard, thought she understood where he was coming from. She preferred to be recognized as a good girl, because she thought he was now seeing her as off limits. Even dangerous, which was why she had chosen the word "jailbait." And yet to be called nice was just a little more than she could bear.

He grinned again. "Interesting too," he said reassuringly. "Fascinating, really."

"Oh, go away," she said. She was back in her cloud of nice-girl safety now. She thought they'd reached some understanding, that they were dealing as equals again. "No, wait. Don't go away, just hush and play for me some more." She handed him her guitar.

"Yes, my lady," he said. "As my lady commands." But he settled himself comfortably into the sand, retuned the guitar as best he could, and played more. He played what he thought her tastes would be, Gordon Lightfoot and Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen, and found that he'd guessed right. Slightly intellectual acoustic hippie. She cooed at him, "Wow, you have a nice voice, too." When she was being perfectly candid, her voice was still at the cusp of childhood, had a simple music of its own that he liked.

"What grade are you in?" he said.

"Ninth." She misunderstood his incomprehension. "Really. I just skipped a couple." He shook his head. He didn't care. It was something he'd heard mortals say to youngsters, but he realized he had no idea what came next, after the answer.

"The session is real," he said. "On

Fountain Avenue." He gave her an address. "We start at eleven, if you want to come." She started to stiffen, and he teased her fear: "Not in my car. I don't have one, anyway." He handed her the guitar back. "If you show up, I'll see you." He smiled a little. "I have to go catch a bite to eat now." He started back up the beach towards the pier, stuck with walking in the sand because her eyes would surely be following him.

"Hey—my name is Victoria," she shouted after him.

He turned around, summoning his current name to mind. "I go by Paco," he said. She waved, and he waved back in imitation, then turned his senses forward, to the pilings. The

dark space where he belonged, where there should be someone who would not be a nice young middle-class girl trying out fragmentary melodies on her cheap guitar "for the wind." Someone who would never, never be reported missing. Someone whose blood would give him his life in the intimate act that was the wicked heart and greatest joy of his existence. The act that alone raised the dark singing inside him, the thing that never quite came from his guitars, the bloodborne hymn in his body that his teacher and the old bluesman would have understood as having *duende*, that dark transformation of death into something that mixed life and art and was music. ♣

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: APOLLONIA LEAF was raised in Southern California, has traveled around the world, and still loves the sands of Santa Monica best. She says: "The Ash Grove was a real place that was destroyed in a fire. The musician I have in mind for the Delta bluesman is Mississippi John Hurt."

ABOUT THE ARTIST: LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK normally designs and sketches a new piece of artwork with no background music whatsoever—leaving full concentration for the art with no distractions. Once the drawing is ready for final inking or painting, however, she listens to Cajun/Zydeco, 50s rock 'n roll, Doo Wop or Jean-Michel Jarre. She doesn't choose music that matches the mood of the picture: no sombre music while illustrating horror, or Celtic music while illustrating fantasy, but for this particular drawing, she did flip through dozens of old record albums from the 60s to get that flower power poster feel for the finished piece.

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Please be patient: we receive a great number of submissions and replies can take up to four months. We do accept simultaneous submissions; please let us know immediately if the work becomes unavailable.

All submissions should be addressed to:

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Issue	Closing Date	Camera-ready copy due	Release
Spring	Nov. 1	Nov. 15	Feb. 1
Summer	Feb. 1	Feb. 15	May 1
Fall	May 1	May 15	Aug. 1
Winter	Aug. 1	Aug. 15	Nov. 1

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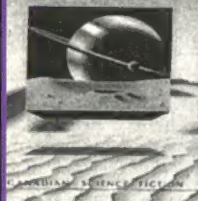


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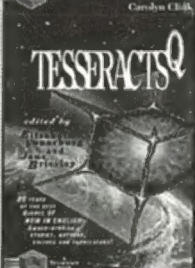
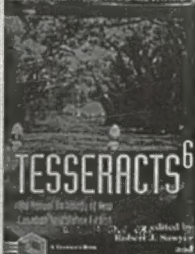
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